

When The Sunlight Dies

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/32220166) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/32220166>.

Rating:	Mature
Archive Warning:	Graphic Depictions Of Violence
Category:	M/M, Multi
Fandom:	Dream SMP
Relationship:	Clay Dream/GeorgeNotFound (Video Blogging RPF) , Alexis Quackity/Karl Jacobs/Sapnap , Feral Boys - Friendship , Clay Dream & GeorgeNotFound & Sapnap (Video Blogging RPF)
Character:	Sapnap (Video Blogging RPF) , GeorgeNotFound (Video Blogging RPF) , Clay Dream (Video Blogging RPF) , Karl Jacobs , Alexis Quackity , Wilbur Soot , TommyInnit (Video Blogging RPF) , Technoblade (Video Blogging RPF) , Toby Smith Tubbo
Additional Tags:	Pining , Getting Together , Established Relationship , Angst with a Happy Ending , Hurt/Comfort , Implied/Referenced Intimate Partner Violence (not between tagged ships) , Grief/Mourning , Panic Attacks , Trauma and Trauma Responses , Flashbacks , Alternate Universe - Royalty , Found Family , Families of Choice , Implied/Referenced Abuse , Implied/Referenced Alcohol Abuse/Alcoholism , Fluff , Knights - Freeform , Prince!George , knight!sapnap , Injury Recovery , More detailed content warnings in individual chapters , DSMP , Spanish Translation Available
Language:	English
Series:	Part 1 of scarecrow
Collections:	The Cozy Nest , mmm favs , would commit arson for you , recommendationsfromsleepetomar , sleepsfavoritebooks , Good Reads , To reread thirty times , favourite dsmp fics :') , Quackity's Golden Fics , dream smp/sbi fics I've read (and cried to)
Stats:	Published: 2021-07-01 Completed: 2021-10-07 Chapters: 14/14 Words: 225025

When The Sunlight Dies

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Summary

It's been three months since the coup. Three months since Sapnap, a knight, and George, his prince, have been chased out of their home. Three months of being on the run, trying to find a safe way out of Kinoko without being caught by the president's mercenaries or an opportunistic bounty hunter.

It's hard, but it would be a lot easier if he didn't have to worry about George's sudden taste for wandering. Or the two guides that have worked their way into his group, promising them a safer way out of the kingdom. And it would be a whole lot easier if Sapnap wasn't flying solo, doing a job made for two.

And then there's the Godling to worry about. Yeah. That's a whole thing.

Notes

holy shit. we can't believe we actually did this. really can't actually believe it. not to brag or anything, but we wrote this in a month, basically. 160k words, all prewritten for you, so you don't have to worry about us getting bored and leaving it unfinished, something we've both done in the past oops.

we wouldn't have gotten this far without the help of our amazing betas [Oracle](#), [Jess](#) and [Tay!](#)

If you wanna go scream about dnf or karlnapity the more shippy aspects of the fic, go and chat to [hannah](#), and yes, this means that the other co author does not ship dnf in the slightest. Yes, even after nearly 160k words. its all her fault, i'm telling you. ily hannah.

I (me, bramble, [socials here!](#)), would also like to shoutout the support of the yg discord who I have been dripfeeding spoiler-less snippets since we started writing and have been so lovely and supportive, and for my gf as well for not being into this fandom at all but putting up with me all the same, and providing her excellent zoologist knowledge for Pain.

Speaking of pain, this fic will deal with some pretty heavy and dark subjects. To avoid more explicit spoilers, we haven't put them in the main tags, but each chapter will have their own content warnings that will have more detail when it comes up, and we won't be offended at all if you need to dip out. Your comfort always comes before content.

Anyway, we have rambled on long enough, we are so excited to be sharing this with the world - our first collab!!! (despite knowing each other for 6/7 years lol) - so please, if you like it, leave a kudos/comment and let us know how much you enjoyed! we feed off it!

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

Chapter 1

Sapnap's been following a trail of broken branches and pressed grass for close to an hour - he's had to go slow, keep quiet so he doesn't give himself away. He doesn't think he'll need the advantage, not really, but it helps to have and he isn't arrogant enough to give it away for no reason. In the end, Sapnap is a hunter first and a knight second, and he slips into this role with an ease that echoes the child he once was. It's almost enough to distract him from the lump in his throat when he remembers exactly who he learned alongside. Almost. He doesn't think about that, cuts the thoughts off with brutal efficiency. He follows the trail.

When he finds them, it's because he spots a familiar sky-blue cloak through the gaps of the trees dotting the end of the forest biome they'd been traversing for a few days now. Figures that George couldn't just sit pretty for one more day without wandering off. Only a few miles away, a small plains biome opens up - he can see the next forest on the other side, but it's a welcome change of scenery minus his kidnapped friend.

George's cloak gave away where the little group had stopped, likely to figure out their next step. Rarely do these mercenary groups make it to this point, with George actually sitting between them on the ground, tied up with a thick rope wound around his arms and, - if Sapnap had to guess - his wrists, too. Sapnap counts four this time, two more than the last group and four less than the group before that. He thinks he's figured the pattern out and this is too small a crew, too small for taking them in. It would be insulting if they'd sent only four random mercs out to beat him, but Sapnap is nearly a hundred percent sure that they were only meant to do reconnaissance and his fucking fool of a friend wandered right into their grasp by accident. He sees plenty of evidence that they've been camped out here a few days, perhaps hoping to cut the two of them off on this part of the path. Or maybe it's just luck.

Either way, the terrain is in their favor. Sapnap can't get close, not without giving himself away. They have to leave the plains eventually, though, and the capital is back the way they came. He's better positioned here than he would be going in sword swinging. And maybe some time tied up will finally get it through George's thick fucking head to stop wandering every time it's his turn to keep watch. Sapnap will wait unless he has reason to move in.

He's barely made himself comfortable when he suddenly has reason to move in, a reason in the form of his loud, spoiled best friend.

"This *hurts!*!" George says primly, regal even after months of hard traveling and lean meals. He's lost weight in the time since they ran, Sapnap notes with a frown. "At least loosen it! It's not like I can go anywhere. It's flat land, you lot would shoot me down immediately!"

"Shut up." One of the mercs kicks dirt at him and George splutters when the dust and grass gets in his face, "Keep your mouth closed."

"But you've got me tied so tight! What if I lose my hands!?"

"Keep talking and you'll start losing *teeth*, princeling." A second merc plants a foot on George's back and shoves, pushing him down into the dirt and grass and bearing down, stepping on him even while George squawks and yells, "Now, you're gonna tell us where your knight is. We don't have time to wait around and we know he's hiding somewhere."

Sapnap fingers the bow he and George share, slowly pulling it from his back. He doesn't have too many arrows - he usually leaves the shooting to George while he melees, so he'd left most of them

along with the rest of their stuff in a hiding spot near their camp - but he has enough for now.

"I don't know who you're talking about."

The second merc leans forward, puts more pressure on George's back. George lets out another pained yelp, wiggling around underfoot until the merc grabs him by the back of the neck and pulls him up. He goes silent with a choked gasp.

"Then you're an idiot," The man spits, "You royals are all the same. Fucking arrogant little pricks, wandering around without your knight like you're still at home. Thinking you're better than us just because you've got a fool knight errant at your side."

He lets go of George's neck with a flick of a strong forearm, dropping him back to the ground carelessly. George coughs, dust in his eyes and nose and mouth, and it gives Sapnap a chance to move closer. He hovers in the treeline, waiting.

"You sound jealous," George says, around a mouthful of soil. Sapnap sighs and pulls his bow back, notches an arrow. Takes careful aim. George and his smart mouth.

"Watch it, princeling," The first merc, clearly the leader, sneers with a mouth full of brawl-broken teeth, "Job order didn't say anything about keeping you intact. Could easily cut out your tongue and still get paid a pretty penny. Now," He leans down, pulling George's chin up so his gaze is forced upwards, "I'm only going to ask once more before we make it so you can't answer. Where -"

Sapnap can't see George's face, but he hears the heinous loogie he must spit in the guy's face because the merc rears back with a sound of rage and Sapnap looses his arrow while the man is still wiping his eyes.

There are few sounds as disgusting as the sound of someone hawking a loogie. One of those few sounds is that of a man choking on his own blood. As the arrow sinks into the merc's neck, Sapnap cannot bring himself to care too deeply. He has more important things to worry about, namely the way the blood sprays over George's face or the way that the rest of the mercs dissolve into chaos. It doesn't take long for them to figure out where the arrow came from, but Sapnap is already dodging behind the next tree and then the next, using the high grass as cover to stay lost. He's not the best archer, and his next two arrows miss before the third hits its mark just as one of the men not holding George comes close enough to enter melee range. The man goes down with an arrow through the eye and Sapnap steps over him as he draws Nightmare to meet the oncoming swordsman. He swings twice with brutal efficiency - once to knock the man's sword out of his hand, the next to gut him. His opponent drops to the ground, gasping around the wound in his stomach. Sapnap steps over him.

The final merc, the one who had pressed his boot into George's back, has drawn his sword and kicks George out of the way. He's the biggest, the broadest, Sapnap assumes he is supposed to be the brawn of the group. When the man roars in anger, Sapnap concedes that he probably has quite the presence on a battlefield with a yell like that. But this isn't a battlefield, it's a graveside to a hole yet to be dug, and Sapnap doesn't fear this random mercenary today.

He brings Nightmare to position.

"You were looking for me?" He says cheekily.

"*You-!*" The merc shouts, nearly incoherent in rage, and lunges toward him. Sapnap grins, vicious. He dodges the merc's clumsy attack; anger is easy to take advantage of. Sapnap is angry, too, but

he's had months now to fine-tune it, shape it so it's less a blunt weapon and more a finely crafted armor. This merc's anger reeks of fear. Maybe it's his demon blood, but Sapnap swears he can smell it. Sapnap sidesteps, slams Nightmare into the man's back, and sends him sprawling over his now-dead companion. He doesn't bother watching him fall.

"For fuck's sake, George!" He kneels at George's side, pulling him up from his sprawl, "You good?"

"Just peachy." George gags, "There's dirt in my teeth, Sapnap, it's disgusting! Knife, please."

Sapnap pulls a simple knife from his belt, tries to reach for George's ropes only for George's clever fingers to snatch the knife from him to do it himself. George tries to maneuver Sapnap's knife in his hands to let himself free but Sapnap knows he's only going to end up hurting himself.

"Just let me -" Sapnap starts to order as George glances up at him, but then George shrieks in alarm - "Sap! Behind you!" - and yanks Sapnap out of the way in time to avoid a sword through the back.

Sapnap jolts back to his feet and whirls around, only just bringing Nightmare up in time to block the next incoming swing of the iron sword. The blow is solid enough that momentum moves him back a step and he accidentally trips over George on the ground behind him. He hopes George doesn't stab himself with the knife while Sapnap's distracted (it's happened before).

Nightmare and the merc's sword grind as they slide against each other until they're nearly crossed at the hilt, both Sapnap and the merc straining to keep their position.

"Once you're dead," the merc snarls, flecks of spittle landing on Sapnap's face as he holds himself against all the weight, "I'm going to have fun making your princeling pay for what you did to my friends."

"Dude," Sapnap grunts as he spots George out of the corner of his eye, thankfully stab-wound free, glancing between the knife and the merc with a sort of *how do I help* look on his face, "your breath fucking stinks."

He twists, the merc's sword skating off Nightmare and into the air just to his left, and George tosses the knife at him right on cue. He catches it and plunges it directly into the man's thigh in the same movement he takes to snatch it from the air, one fell swoop of sharp blade that slides through skin and muscle easy as pie. There's a bellow of pain from above him, but it cuts off a second later. Nightmare slides even easier than the knife, buried up to the hilt in the merc's chest in only a second. Blood drips down and over his hand. It's warm, soaks into his shirt. Damn, he'll have to scrub it out before it sets in. He'll make George do it as penance.

The man slumps forward, all of his considerable weight on Sapnap.

With not insignificant effort, he pushes the man off him, Nightmare sliding out with a slick squelch that makes George go a little green. He ignores the final gurgling and mangled noises from the dying man and turns to George. For someone so recently in a hostage situation, he looks simply put out. There's a frown on his face that shifts to something more childish and petulant as he holds out his bound wrists.

"What?" Sapnap asks, "Why are you looking at me like that? Worried I would just abandon your sorry ass?"

"Nah," George says, "I knew you'd come."

He says it simply, an indisputable fact, and they both know it's true, even as the anger that he'd

swallowed to make sure George was safe is starting to bubble and churn in his stomach.

“Good freakin’ thing I did,” He says, to the background sound of the merc’s last breaths behind him. He recovers his knife and saws until the rope falls away, helps George to his feet before can even open his mouth to whine. The helpless act was funnier when Sapnap wasn’t playing the knight in shining armor.

“The last time I got captured, at least they fed me,” George grumbles, rubbing at his sore wrists.

“These aren’t palace guards,” Sapnap replies, a flash fire flare of temper in his voice, “They were mercs. They don’t care about who you are. They’re only in it for the money, and *they will hurt you* to get it. You know that.”

“I’m *fine*, Sapnap,” George rolls his eyes but startles when Sapnap grabs his wrists. He manages to keep his grip gentle, turns George’s hands to check the rope burns and makes sure the skin isn’t broken or any damage has been done aside from some scrapes. George allows it, sporting a bemused expression.

“You might not have been,” Sapnap grits his teeth to restrain his annoyance, and he can’t help but shake George just a little when he’s done looking his wrists over, just to try and shake some damn sense into him, “I *told* you to stay at the campsite!”

“I’m an adult, I can take care of myself -”

“Says the man who just got himself fucking captured, *again* -”

“I knew you would find me!” George insists, and Sapnap resists the urge to pinch the bridge of his nose in pained exasperation.

“What,” He says, his voice even by some miracle of restraint, “was so important that you decided to head out on your own when this entire country is tearing itself apart trying to find you? Without me?”

There’s a beat of silence; too silent. There should be a joke, an arm around his shoulders, or slung around George’s. Something to break the silence. Anything.

Instead, the woods stand silent and sentinel. George doesn’t answer, but he does glance away from Sapnap, and that alone is answer enough. Sapnap drops his friend’s wrists with a frustrated sigh. The anger in his chest fizzles out slowly, as he drags his hands down his face. He doesn’t look at George as he takes a deep breath to combat the hollowness at the core of his heart. It’s just another reminder that an integral part of their life is missing, is gone for good maybe, and *that* alone hurts more than George disregarding his safety on a lark.

He bends down and begins to clean Nightmare on the grassy bank. He still isn’t used to its weight; it was balanced for someone else entirely. Sapnap methodically wipes down the blade with a soldier’s training and all the care of grief. He’s glad George has turned to start picking through the mercs’ remaining supplies, else he might see the briefest hitch of Sapnap’s shoulders.

As he always does, he swallows down the moment. Refuses to feel it, even with this sword in his hand, maintained to a perfection that none of his other weapons are. When he slides it into place at his side, Sapnap feels somewhat better.

“Found anything good?” He asks, clearing his throat roughly.

George shrugs, “Some food, basic weapons we don’t need. Normal stuff.”

“Food’s always a plus,” Sapnap acknowledges, and winces at his own tone. He doesn’t *like* being angry at George, doesn’t enjoy being frustrated like a parent whose kid keeps wandering off. But gods damn it if that isn’t what it feels like most of the time. It’s hard, being terrified all the fucking time that George is going to be taken from him, too, at any moment. The man’s got the self-preservation skills of a particularly dense duck. “Grab it and let’s go. We shouldn’t hang about and wait for any more of these fuckers.”

George doesn’t answer him, but he does pick up a sack and start collecting the food from the furnace, gathering up the supplies that they can actually use, and tossing aside anything they can’t. Sapnap takes the chance to survey the plain. It’s not very big, more a field than a plain, with none of the naturally roaming herd animals about and little evidence of much else living in it. He doesn’t even spot any tracks, so either those mercs scared everything off when they set up camp a few days ago or this place acts as more of a scenic stop than any important part of the ecosystem. Either way, it’s useless to them. They’ll have to move on, hopefully find a river close by to wash off. His shirt is covered in blood and George will only allow the drying splatters all over his face to stand for so long before even he starts to complain about wanting a bath.

“Here.” George finds him kneeling by one of the bodies, checking it for hints of which faction sent them. When Sapnap looks up, he’s holding out four arrows, two of them bloody. Only one is beyond repair. He’ll ask George to fletch more from the supply of feathers and flint they’ve collected tonight while he’s setting up camp.

The arrows are a peace offering. Silently, Sapnap accepts them and stands up. He breaks the head off the broken arrow to reuse, discards the split body on the ground. George stands with the mostly full sack. They’re both bloody. Sapnap’s still coming down from the pool of fear-anger-adrenaline which has been fueling him for the last some-odd hour, and he’s beginning to feel the fatigue that comes on after every fight, lately. He used to feel like he could run for hours after every success, like each victory was enough to keep him functioning without food or sleep or water for at least a full day after. Now, each victory is hollow - just a part of the day, a part of survival.

Just another week or two. Just another week or two, and then maybe they’ll be able to settle down somewhere safe and Sapnap can just *rest* until he’s got his strength back, fatten himself and George up again with sleep and good food and security. He’ll come back, once he has George settled; he’s sworn to himself that he would return, but even a half-demon needs to recuperate before he can just dive right back into the thick of it.

Still, that’s a week. This is the third group of mercs they’ve run into in the last ten days. Maybe that wouldn’t be such a big deal if not for George’s sudden new lust for solo adventure. The last two weeks have been a steady hell of George taking every chance to skitter off somewhere while Sapnap’s back is turned. Sapnap goes to rub his face or pinch his nose, then realizes he has blood still caked onto his skin, under his nails, and crusting in the creases of his fingers. He just barely holds himself back from accidentally smearing it across his face.

“They’re getting desperate.” He decides. “They know we’re close to the border.”

He doesn’t mention how he’s getting more than a little desperate himself. Desperation breeds exhaustion, and right now he just wants to set up camp and get some gods damned rest even though he’s only been awake for less than two hours. His arms ache. Nightmare isn’t his, doesn’t appreciate being used by someone who isn’t its master, and it drags at his hip in punishment.

“Maybe we should leave the paths.” George digs around the sack, pulls out a perfectly ripe apple and hands it to Sapnap, “Be a little more discreet.”

“I don’t know these forests well enough to leave the main path.” Sapnap hates to admit it but he

doesn't. There's no point in lying; it's just George. He knows much worse about Sapnap than that he isn't brushed up on the geography of the eastern border of Kinoko. Sapnap should have bought a map the last time they were in a town, but it had seemed like a risk he wasn't able to take at the time, finding a cartographer willing to sell.

"Maybe we can find a guide?" George offers the apple more emphatically and Sapnap reluctantly takes it. When he bites in, the flesh is crisp and sweet. He's suddenly ravenous. He eats the apple, core and all, and licks the droplets of juice from his fingertips. When he looks up, there's a thick slab of dried meat waiting. He eats that, too, while they finish picking over the camp. He doesn't answer George's question. He doesn't have one. A guide would help, for sure, and George probably isn't very familiar to the people in this region. It might be worth the risk.

"We'll worry about it later." Sapnap decides when the camp has been cleaned out and he's piled all four bodies together just out of immediate sight, "For now, we backtrack to get our stuff and then cross the forest going east."

"Still to Snowchester?"

"Still to Snowchester." Sapnap confirms and takes the sack from George's hands to sling it over his shoulder. George takes the bow and the rest of the arrows, thoughtlessly twirls one between long, thin fingers.

The walk back to their camp is quiet. It takes only half an hour, Sapnap more confident with his retreat than his approach, and they collect their things quickly, long used to the routine. The sack gets redistributed into the enderchest they switch off wearing on their backs like a pack. George tracks down the river not too far from camp where he'd caught the fish they'd eaten for dinner the night before and they take the chance to scrub off. By the time George is complaining about his fingers hurting as he scrubs a rough brush to get the blood out of his and Sapnap's shirt both - his punishment for wandering off during watch - Sapnap's calmed down. He finds a smile comes easier to his face while he listens to George complain. It reminds him of when they were kids, when he was barely a teen and George was the tallest of them due to the extra years he had on them, and his dad would catch them doing things they weren't supposed to. Bad would never tell the Queen or the Prince Consort, but he would make all three of them do laundry until their hands were raw.

He cleans Nightmare properly while George takes care of their clothes, an oiled cloth and stone at his side to sharpen its edges. It pulses occasionally, the netherite prickling at his fingertips, tasting his identity. His own netherite sword, when he still had it, warmed in his palm when it recognized him. Nightmare stays cold, as if it's never been touched by skin before. It comforts Sapnap somehow, how stubborn this fucking sword is. Three months and some odd weeks (one hundred and sixteen days to be exact) he's been fighting with it nonstop and it still doesn't recognize a new master. Sapnap knows that the day this sword warms in his hand, he'll truly give up hope. But that day isn't today, and probably won't even be tomorrow, so he puts it out of his head.

One day at a time. Maybe two if he's feeling frisky. Sapnap hasn't felt frisky in a while.

"Come here," Sapnap says, eventually putting Nightmare to the side and picking up one of the cleaner cloths to wring it out in the gently flowing water. George, in comparison to his earlier complaints, doesn't say a word as Sapnap directs him to the bank of the river, gets him to sit down, and with a softness that surprises even himself, begins to clean the blood from George's face. He startles at first, seemingly having forgotten that there's a mix of blood and mud dried and caked on his skin.

"Thanks," he says, a little hoarsely, when Sapnap dips the significantly dirtier cloth in the river.

“No problem,” Sapnap replies, and can almost imagine that George is thanking him for everything else too.

They redress eventually. Sapnap’s shirt dries supernaturally fast, lightly steaming when it touches his skin until the dampness has gone away. George isn’t so lucky. Sapnap doesn’t offer to help, because it’s just part of the punishment. Sapnap is petty, sue him. In the long run, George will forget his discomfort and do whatever he wants to do again, but at least Sapnap can have this tiny little revenge. George’s dirty looks mean he knows it, too, and that makes it all the sweeter.

They set out with the sun high. The field gets left behind within an hour. They keep off the path, but only just, Sapnap fearful of getting them lost and George of losing his footing if he doesn’t keep his eyes on the ground in front of him. They play the same games every day to pass the time and they got old within the first week but they do it every day anyway. George names something that starts with an A, and then Sapnap names something that starts with a B, and then George picks up. When they reach Z, they go backward. If one of them hesitated, which stopped happening around three months ago, he’s in charge of making dinner that night. When that gets boring, they make up songs together. Sapnap laughs so hard he cries at one point while George smugly recites a dirty tavern song as if making a royal proclamation. It’s fun, for as boring and tiring and frustrating it is. If he’s forced to trek the entire kingdom on the run, he’s glad he’s doing it with his best friend.

They stop when night is starting to set in, with maybe thirty minutes of light left. Sapnap has this camp thing down to a science by this point; they have their tent in the enderchest so he pulls it out and snaps the fasteners into place while George sets about lighting a fire and putting their torches in a wide semicircle to protect their campsite from mobs. They’ve got plenty of food from the mercs so they don’t need to go hunt, a boon in an unfamiliar and unsafe forest. Sapnap leaves George to set out the beds and pulls out three apples and three slabs of dried beef. He fills their three cups with water from his water skin and then sets the apples and meat by the fire to warm while they finish up securing their tent.

When they sit down, George stares at the third serving still sitting by the fire. Like every night, Sapnap is going to leave it right there. By morning, some scavenger will have taken off with it (or, maybe, somehow, by some stroke of luck, by some miracle, it would be -) and it will be gone. Part of Sapnap wants George to acknowledge it. Wants him to ask, wants him to get upset or angry or nod in understanding or demand that Sapnap just accept it like he has. Part of Sapnap begs every single night for George to acknowledge the extra rations. To open the door to questions.

The rest of Sapnap doesn’t want either of them to broach the topic. He’s tender, raw, there’s a pain in his chest that hurts too badly to even attempt to speak around it.

He eats his apple. George doesn’t say anything about the ration. George eats his apple, too.

“I’ll take first watch.” George offers when they’ve eaten and night has fallen. The distant groans of zombies, the skittering of spiders just outside of the lights is a familiar backdrop. It used to be that Sapnap couldn’t sleep, always terrified that he’d close his eyes and a mob would creep close enough to kill them while he rested. Now, he sleeps on a needle’s point, anyway. If anything crosses the perimeter of the camp, he’ll wake up. Anything except George, at least, who Sapnap’s sleeping mind is so used to that he could do a whole one-man act and Sapnap would snore right through it.

“I slept last night.” Sapnap denies, “You rest. You had a rough start to your day.”

“You did, too, Sap.” George frowns at him, “Sleep. You can’t call five hours every three days a good amount of rest.”

“I’m fine, really,”

“Sapnap.” George points firmly at their beds, “*Sleep.* I promise, I won’t wander off. I’ll stay right here. If you open your eyes, I’ll be the first thing you see.”

Sapnap hesitates. Usually, he’d fight it. Usually, he’d smack George’s hand down and bully George into laying down. But...

“Don’t run off again,” Sapnap says, but any bite in his voice is stifled by a yawn. He’s so fucking exhausted. Any response from George is missed entirely, as Sapnap drops his head onto the bed, sleep dragging him down between one breath and the next. He’s out like a light.

It’s dark. There are echoing screams in the distance, shouts of panic but they are stretched thin, twisted into unrecognizable shapes. His chest is burning, ribs clenching like a vice around his heart as his feet pound on familiar stone, down the hallways of his childhood. For all that he knows this place as well as he knows himself, he finds that he’s utterly lost.

The shouts get closer. Metal on stone slabs, broken vases and ripped tapestries trampled underfoot; a chase underway. Sapnap isn’t sure whether he is the hunter or the hunted. There’s a crash behind him. When he turns, a shadow stands shaking in the wake of a fallen suit of armor.

“They’ll,” the shadow says, features hidden by panic and shadow in the hallway; their voice trembles on the edge of tears, “They’ll kill me if they find me. I don’t wanna die, man, please. Please.”

Like a rehearsed script, Sapnap’s feet turn towards the shadow. A doorway appears on his left, a servant’s path he only knows from his years exploring, and his mouth moves without conscious thought, “In here, quick, they won’t know to look in here.”

His sword is balanced in his grip, warm. The shadow stumbles forward; their clothes, that of an assistant or some kind of advisor are always the clearest in this dream, the blue tie loose and disheveled and brighter than anything around them. Ripped and ragged like a noose. He remembers the bruises, if not the face. The blood, if not the features. So much blood.

They always only just make it in time. Sapnap swings the door closed as the footsteps crescendo into a cacophony of metal and clanging and shouts. He can never tell if these knights were the ones that raised him or the ones trying to take the throne. Either way, his hand positions itself over the mouth of the shadow he saved. Against his chest, he can feel the graceless, frantic dash of a heart unused to combat. Smell the fear, so intense he thinks he’ll never fully clear it from his senses. The shadow is crying, great shuddering, perfectly silent sobs. Blood seeps down Sapnap’s hand where he holds it over a panting mouth. He feels the edges of a wound with the tips of his fingers.

It’s here that the lines between his memory and fantasy begin to blur, colors dripping around him like a painting left out in the rain. It all begins to drip and melt together, the safety of the door eroding away second by second. Even with his hand over their mouth, the shadow begins to babble, “It’s too late, it’s too late, they saw me, I’m gonna die here, you let them kill me, oh fuck, it’s too late, it’s too late -”

“No,” Sapnap tries to say, “I saved you. I got you out, I saved you -” but no sound leaves his lips. Sapnap doesn’t even get a chance to tell them to be quiet, to try and push away the voiced fear that is all too close to reality; he is, was, will be, too late, always too late, and no amount of protests will make it otherwise.

The shadow's voice is cut off as a sword slips through the door as if it isn't there, and they barely make a sound as they crumple to the floor, the door fading away to nothing. It slid through that thin protection as easy as butter, and through the shadow even easier. Sapnap looks into a shocked, terrified, tear-and-blood-stained face and watches with horror as they melt into nothing. Somehow, though he doesn't give the shadow his sword in this version, he is suddenly without his weapon anyway.

"You've already failed," The faceless knight holding the sword growls, "You'll never make it in time."

Sapnap doesn't bother with a response, just pushes past the threats made of running paint and dripping ink. He has to get to them. He can't fail them. He *can't*.

It beats desperate in his heart, that last broken promise, and he already knows he is too late.

He tries to run faster but it's like trying to run through honey, through molasses, and he's never going to get there in time.

The doors to the throne room take no effort at all to move under his hands, thin and indistinct. When they burst open, he sees the scene laid out before him. All that is clear is the same image that haunts the space behind his eyelids every single day, every single blink since this moment.

Sapnap is late, he's always been too late, always will be, nothing but a failure to the two people who always mattered to him more than himself.

He tries to shout. But the honey, the molasses is up to his chest, his neck, pressing down and choking the voice from him even as he screams, helpless and desperate; *GEORGE! GEORGE, PLEASE, WHERE IS HE, WHERE IS -*

Sapnap bolts straight upright, familiar name tangled in his throat, hand already clenched tight in the air where he'd been reaching out in his dream. He drops it, finds Nightmare at his side, the grip chilled in his palm. Outside the tent, he hears a flock of birds startled by something, taking to the skies and heading off into the moonless night.

He's panting, he realizes. Like he just ran a mile sprint or had been yelling for an hour straight. Maybe he had been. His hands shake as he pulls Nightmare closer to him, letting it sink deep into the earth, using it to ground himself. Sapnap remembers learning once that a brain can't just make up faces, and so everyone in your dreams is someone you have already met. In the same way, Sapnap's nightmares never tell him anything he doesn't already know and this was no exception. He failed them, both of them, and all he's left with is a best friend he can't really talk to and a sword that isn't his.

"It's still a stupid fucking name," He mutters, and his chest aches with the lack of answer. No, *okay, pandas* shot back his way.

Taking a few deep breaths, he finally lifts his head to look at George. He doesn't know what he'll say; his nightmares are routine at this point, but whether George has either noticed or is willing to broach the topic is a whole different question. He's more likely to claim a migraine and let this conversation hang in the air between them for another three long months. Every aftermath of this dream ends the same way, with George's "Drop it, Sap," in the voice that neither of them ever argued with because it was used so rarely.

Sapnap blinks. Blinks again. His heart, so recently racing, jumps into action like an electric shock. His limbs move without thought, on his feet before he can even realize what he's doing.

George is gone. *Again.*

“Fucking - George!” Sapnap hisses into the darkness of the forest, “George! Where the fuck are you?”

It's still night. He can hear mobs, some closer than others. The hisses of spiders and long, pained groans of zombies, the distant twang of skeletons fighting. There are creepers behind every tree, it feels like, and the darkness of the forest around them is impenetrable. Their torches barely bring light a foot out, their glow smothered quickly by the heavy shadow of ancient trees. Their fire is low, close to near embers. He'd guess it's gone unattended for at least an hour. George could be -

Panic bubbles in his chest, static threatening to send him running into the trees in a desperate search. He swallows it down, lets it turn into adrenaline, lets it fuel him. It works, to an extent. He can see a trail, footprints in the dew-fragile grass, George's barely used sword gone from their supplies. He should go slow, careful. But all Sapnap can see is exactly what happened the last time he was too slow, too late. He hesitates but the fear wins out and he races into the trees.

He grabs a torch as he passes, not bothering to obfuscate their camp.

“*George*, you motherfucker,” He whispers into the woods, louder than it should be but at least quieter than the yell he wants to let out, “George!”

The trail goes further into the thickets, and Sapnap, already out of breath from his dream and steam curling from his arms, kneels for just a moment to check it. Only one set of footprints, no sign of a struggle or anyone other than his *stupid, idiotic* friend. Except...

Except that a footfall away, George's diamond sword is lying abandoned amongst the moss and the leaves. Except that for all his foolishness, George should know better than to abandon his weapon, especially if he thought to pick it up in the first place. Except he might already be too late.

He stares at the sword for just a second, blood roaring in his ears as he tries to process, tries to think, tries to force his limbs to move so he can go, so he can do his gods damned job.

He can't.

His heart is too loud, his breathing too shaky, and if he doesn't move, he's going to get his friend killed.

It can't have been more than a few seconds, but time drags on for Sapnap until his breath catches and his feet move and -

Cold iron presses an icy kiss to his throat.

“Funny,” an unfamiliar voice says, “I've never caught a hunter off his guard like this. If you want my advice, man? You should take better care of your possessions or you end up losing them.”

Sapnap is moving before his assailant can say another word. He ignores the sting as the blade cuts shallowly into the skin of his neck, just pushes forward and down into a roll. He grabs George's abandoned sword with his free hand on the spring back up, turning in a low circle and bringing the points of both blades up in a narrow arch.

It's less than a second later that the stranger blinks back at him, eyes wide as the two swords cross at his throat. He drops his sword to the ground without being instructed. Specks of Sapnap's bloodstain the trail that George left behind. He can feel it trickling down his neck, staining into his shirt. He won't be bothered to wash it out a second time until at least a few days from now so *that*

will be fun.

“Where is he?” Sapnap snarls, “Tell me where he is and I’ll make it quick.”

“Whoa, whoa, I come in peace!”

“You should have thought of that before you took him and nearly cut my throat -”

“First of all, you cut your own throat. Secondly, I didn’t take anyone, we found him -”

“We?”

The assailant’s Adam’s apple bobs dangerously close to the edge of the twin swords as he swallows. As close as he is now, Sapnap can make out his features even in the darkness of the forest; a face younger than he would have expected, beanie shoved over long black hair and a scar marring his right eye, turning one cloudy and blue. The scar drags down his cheek, almost bisecting his lip. He’s shorter than Sapnap by just a bit, broad but overall thin, wiry in a way that speaks to stealth rather than brute force. It’s probably why he approached Sapnap as he did, if he had any lick of sense about him. It’s what Sapnap would have done. It still doesn’t mean that he lets down his guard.

All of this hangs in the air for a moment as his assailant opens his mouth, ready to snap back or to explain or to try and bargain his way out of it. Before he speaks, though, his eyes flicker over Sapnap’s shoulder, and then his mouth drops open in fright. Sapnap really hates when that happens.

The man says something and points but all that Sapnap hears is a horribly recognizable hissing.

He doesn’t think. He drops Nightmare and the diamond sword and dives forward, tackling the man to the dense forest floor just as the hissing escalates, and then there is a small, contained *boom* behind them.

His heritage offers some protection from the blast - the heat of it, at least, absorbs into his skin with ease, but the force of it sends them both cartwheeling through the air. The stranger clings to him, shrieking.

Sapnap had dropped the torch. He’d dropped the torch and the light had grown too dim, and that explosion will only draw more of its ilk.

“Holy fucking prime.” The man says shakily from where Sapnap accidentally pinned him to the ground, “G-get off.”

“Sorry,” Sapnap says without thinking - he shouldn’t be fucking apologizing to someone who’s kidnapped his best friend, but he’s polite out of instinct - and sits up on his knees. He looks around in the dark of the forest. Nightmare pulses a dark purple, the gleam bouncing off the diamond sword not too far. Both swords had skittered across the leaves but, thankfully, hadn’t blown up.

A low chittering sound begins, familiar, as patches of lime green begin to rustle through the underbrush.

Sapnap stands quickly, legs a little wobbly. The man stands too, and suddenly Sapnap has an armful of human (presumably) as he stumbles. Sapnap’s lucky he has good balance, or they both would have gone back down.

“We have to run -” the man says, fingers closing on Sapnap’s sleeve, “C-creepers -”

“I need my sword.” Sapnap tries to pry his hands off, “Get *off*, I need to get my sword!”

“But -”

It’s Sapnap that sees it this time, the dreaded green trundling closer, the chittering turned hissing as the whole animal starts to pulse and glow.

“Fuck!” Sapnap curses, yanks the man closer, and takes off for Nightmare. The man shrieks again, goes from pulling at Sapnap to clinging to him. They manage to avoid most of the knockback from the exploding creeper, Sapnap scooping Nightmare up without pause as soon as it comes into reach. The man doesn’t let go of him, his fingers curling painfully into Sapnap’s arm.

“Get *off* me!” He seethes, trying to wriggle out from the man’s death grip, “Get - *ugh* -”

The man is too busy yelling, pulling himself and Sapnap backward rather than going on the attack, spouting off utter nonsense that is more than likely to draw even more attention to them.

“Fucking creepers, fuck, fucking hell, *fucking fuck* -”

“Get off, I can’t fight with you hanging on -”

Another creeper surprises him. This one is already pulsing when it creeps from the bush right next to them, thick black eyes staring straight into Sapnap’s just as it explodes. He barely has time to tuck his new screaming limpet against his chest to protect him from most of the heat as they’re sent rolling. His ears are ringing. The man’s *still* screaming.

“You have to let me go so I can fight!” He tries to reason, voice loud and angry. He thinks he hears more chittering coming closer - the zombies definitely sound like the noise has drawn them nearer. They’re about to be overwhelmed.

“If I let you go, you’ll *kill me!*” The man shakes his head and Sapnap should feel bad because he’s obviously terrified but also he’s holding on to Sapnap’s sword arm and he *needs* that arm.

“I’ll kill you if you don’t let go!”

“Just kill them first!”

Sapnap swears, low and dirty and filled with the worst things he can remember from the royal barracks, and swings Nightmare with his bad hand with all of the frustration and anxiety and anger he’s been holding on to for months now. All that matters is that it sinks into the strangely textured skin of a creeper as it comes closer and the creature hisses as it dissolves into smoke.

“I’m trying! Let go or you’ll kill us both, you fucking -*fuck!*” Sapnap staggers as the man only plasters himself to Sapnap’s back, holding on for dear life in the world’s most unstable piggyback ride. Another creeper trundles slowly towards them, chittering as it advances. Sapnap swings the sword, ignoring how the person on his back yelps when it passes far too close to his nose.

“Hey, watch it, I’ve already got a scar there!”

If he thought it would help, the words “Then get off my back, you dickhead!” would have already left his mouth. As it was, he is far too busy trying to push them both far enough away from the oncoming explosion.

A blast of dirt and leaves hits his face and they both go tumbling back down to the ground. His newest responsibility lets out a pained wheeze as Sapnap lands awkwardly on top of him again. If

there wasn't a wiggling, protesting probably-human underneath him, Sapnap would be able to turn around faster. He can already hear the approach of another mob, that same garbled hissing through his ringing ears. Only this time, he knows he isn't going to get away.

Even through the static in his ears, he hears the notch and loose of an arrow as clear as a bell. A rush of steam erupts as the creeper fades away into nothing, leaving only a pile of gunpowder at their feet.

"Thank prime." The man under him finally relaxes his grip and goes limp on the ground. Sapnap slowly opens his eyes and looks up.

George is pale, face pinched in the way it does when he gets one of his headaches, but his eyes are focused as he lowers the bow. Next to him, another unfamiliar figure stands. It takes a moment for Sapnap to focus on them and at first, he thinks it's because of the proximity of the explosion, before he realizes that it's because the stranger is wearing a frankly eye-watering mismatch of clothes, glowing in torchlight. Who the *fuck* are these people?

Reality slams back into him as he scrambles to his feet and over to George, ignoring the groan as he elbows the person below him again.

"Are you okay?" He demands, "Did they hurt you?"

"I'm fine, I'm good, I'm *great* -" George says, face clearing, "Look who needed saving this time, huh?"

Sapnap socks him in the shoulder.

"Ow!" George throws him a wounded look, "I just saved your stupid face, and this is the thanks I get?"

"It wouldn't have needed saving if you stuck to the camp like you were supposed to!" Sapnap replies, smoke starting to curl from under his shoulders. He could cry from the frustration and the relief.

"Sap," George frowns, but Sapnap has only just gotten started.

"You already got tied up *once* today, and apparently you're *trying* to get yourself *killed*, wandering off into the woods in the middle of the night! I'm supposed to protect you, but how can I do that if you keep putting yourself in danger?!"

"I was fine -"

"*You might not have been!!*" Sapnap takes a deep breath, curling his hands in and out of fists. Nightmare is cold in his palm, bringing him just enough clarity that he doesn't start setting things on fire on accident like he did as a kid. "You could be dead, or taken prisoner, and I'd never have fucking known! Or worse, I could be dead and you'd be stuck out here on your own! Did you consider that? Did you even think that through, that you could get us both *killed*? I can't lose you, too, George, I can't fucking do it again -"

"I was trying to help!" George shouts back, throwing his hands up, "You think I don't notice how tired you are? That you've been taking watch almost every single night because you can't trust me to take care of us both? Believe it or not, I *know* it's my fault that we have people after us, and I *know* it's my fault that I'm not a fighter, and I *know* it's my fault whenever they catch up to us because I'm not built for this like you are!"

George has always been an easy crier, Sapnap thinks. He cried at skinned knees and desserts skipped and unfair chore delegations. He's always been an easy crier, too, but they usually steam off his cheeks before they have the chance to fall. As George wipes his eyes furiously on his sleeve, Sapnap feels the heat on his skin simmer and burn out, steam rising at the corners of his eyes for just a second until he's calmed down. The two of them always had someone else wiping their faces before. But it's just them, now, escalating and escalating stupid fights with no one to referee until they end up here, yelling at each other in front of two strangers by torchlight, surrounded by craters and darkness. Sapnap feels like he's lost a limb and half his heart all at once, and he's just...*tired*. He's so tired.

"I thought I saw something in the woods," George says when they're both a little calmer, "And I was going to sort it out while you were asleep. You weren't supposed to wake up before I got back."

"Hey, Gogy, hey," The childhood nickname slips out; he's still angry, months of built-up tension isn't going to be solved by some shouting and tears, but in the end, George is still his best friend. He's still the only thing Sapnap has left. It only takes a moment's deliberation to pull George into a hug, tucking his chin on top of George's head, the same way they did as kids. They're safe, they're alive. That's all that matters.

"Sorry," George says, voice rough, "Sorry, Sapnap, I didn't mean to worry you."

"It's okay," Sapnap says, trying to force himself to believe it, "It's alright. I'm sorry for shouting, just... Just don't wander off like that again. Okay?"

"I'll do my best," George's voice is muffled in Sapnap's chest, but he at least looks sincere when he pulls away and meets Sapnap's eyes. Sapnap hates that he doesn't believe him.

There's an awkward cough behind them. Sapnap's assailant has been helped off the ground by the walking eyesore, resting an arm on their shoulder as they brush the dirt and remains of creepers from their clothes.

Sapnap has Nightmare and George has his bow and quiver of arrows, so Sapnap isn't worried or intimidated. He *is* pissed, though, and he's ready for answers.

"Before anyone does anything rash," says the eyesore, "can we just talk?"

"About what?" Sapnap says through gritted teeth.

"About your apparent status as creeper-bait, fucking Prime, I've never seen so many in one place! What did you do, sign up for a creeper meet-up or something -"

"Q..."

"What, Karl!? Did you see all those!? Since when do creepers travel in fuckin' pods!?"

"We just wanted to help George get back to camp." Karl, apparently, decides to ignore Q's grumbling and just talk to Sapnap, "He stumbled upon us when we were walking and we didn't wanna just leave him out here."

"He said you'd be cautious, but he didn't tell me you'd try to slit your own throat! Thanks for the warning, *George*."

"You *what!*?"

"Don't worry about it." Sapnap waves him off, "What were you two doing wandering in the forest at night? It's dangerous. That one can't even fight!"

"That's why I'm here." Karl pats his chest with an unassuming smile. "Now that you mention it, we probably should have sent me out to find you and kept Quackity with George, huh? Hindsight's twenty-twenty!"

Oh, he's a ditz. Sapnap doesn't lower his guard, but he does decide that it's safer for him and George to get far away from these fools before they end up getting killed. What the fuck kind of name is *Quackity*, anyway? Sapnap doesn't want to die, least of all to some idiot named Quackity.

"Okay." Sapnap decides. "Well, thanks for bringing him back. We're leaving now."

"We are?" George hooks his bow over his shoulder, "But -"

"We're leaving," Sapnap says in a tone he hopes brokers no arguments. It never works, but he always hopes.

"But it's dark and they only have one torch." George says reasonably, "They should come to camp with us."

Sapnap casts a suspicious look at the two strangers. Karl is watching them with wide eyes. He's taller than Quackity, his hair free and insanely fluffy and brown, eyes steel gray in the torchlight. There's something in his eyes that makes Sapnap uncomfortable, like he's under review. Quackity is rubbing his shoulders out, wincing. They *look* harmless. Sapnap doesn't trust either of them as far as he can throw them (though he could probably throw both of them very far).

He yanks George close and lowers his voice.

"These are strangers and we have an entire country attempting to kill us."

"To be fair, they didn't kill us when they could have?"

"That's not a ringing endorsement!"

"Sapnap." George pats his shoulder, "They're coming to camp with us because we need their torch and they need a safe place to sleep for the night. It's a win-win."

"I don't like this."

"You have Nightmare." George motions, "We're perfectly safe."

Sapnap doesn't want to agree. He wants to stamp his feet into the ground and hold firm until these two freaks disappear back into the dark forest they came from. Instead, he begrudgingly nods. Those groans are getting ever-closer and there's no telling how many other mobs are out and about, just watching them or close to stumbling upon them. It isn't safe out here, and the longer they stand and talk, the more danger they're in.

"Fine." He says loud enough for them to hear. "You can come to camp with us. But I want your weapons where I can see them and I'm taking the torch."

Karl and Quackity exchange a glance and then Quackity nods.

"Sounds fair, big man."

Karl offers the torch and Sapnap steps forward to grab it.

"Weapons." He says firmly and Quackity looks around to find his discarded sword.

"Well. I *had* one..." He says when he spots it. A creeper's explosion has destroyed it; the blade twisted from heat and cracked, the grip mostly gone.

"I've got these." Karl lifts up his shirt to show off a few small daggers at his hip, "Not really a bruiser, if you know what I mean."

"You two are walking at night in a forest with six daggers and a single iron sword?" Sapnap can't help but blink at them. They're crazy. They're absolutely crazy.

"Well. I mean," Quackity says defensively, "We didn't have any trouble until you two showed up. We're wily."

Sapnap wants to snap something back but he holds it together and just starts walking instead. He doesn't care. Whatever.

They follow him, George at his side and the strangers at his back. He holds tight to Nightmare the whole way.

Camp is as he left it, except that the fire has burnt out to nothing but weak embers. He uses the torch to relight it, and George and Karl collect some firewood from around the edges of camp while Quackity and Sapnap silently stare each other down.

"Thanks for..." Quackity eventually fidgets, his fingers rolling paper and loose tobacco with practiced ease, drumming on his knees as he lights it on the embers of the fire, "Back there."

"No problem," Sapnap says instead of *you almost killed us, fucker*. Quackity must hear it anyway because he grins big and cheesy. It makes his eyes squint closed, the scar pulling a little. In the brighter light of camp, Sapnap can see it isn't truly old. It looks magically healed, which works faster but is rarely prettier. It's better to let things heal naturally when possible; magic does a rush job. This scar is thin but wicked, over the eye and down the cheek. It looks like a sword wound. It makes Sapnap suspicious, but he doesn't care to probe further. Instead, he rolls his eyes and goes back to tending the fire.

The quiet endures until the fire is roaring again. George sits close to it while Sapnap goes around the edges of camp to double-check the torches marking their camp perimeter and checking their tent. Their beds are still intact, Sapnap's blanket pooled on the ground where it had slipped off earlier. Karl and Quackity don't wander around - Karl lays his cloak out on the ground and they both sit on it, Quackity plopping a small pack between them and pulling out field rations for them to both munch on. Sapnap watches Karl offer some to George, who shakes his head with a smile. Quackity taps his cigarette on the side of his leg, the ash scattering to the wind.

Sapnap is just beginning to think that this is the end of the nightmare, that they'll all half-sleep around the fire until morning, and then the two will be off and he and George can be on their way, when George fucks it all up.

"So...where are you headed?"

"Oh, you know," Karl says, shrugging, "Here and there. My job takes me all over."

George visibly brightens at that and turns to Sapnap with the world's biggest puppy eyes. Sapnap resolutely ignores him.

“And what is your job?” Sapnap asks because if George is going to open up conversation, he at least is going to get some information out of it.

“Librarian. I collect books, too.” Karl says, promptly “And I do a bit of this and that on the side.”

Sapnap waits for him to elaborate, but when there doesn’t seem to be anything forthcoming, he nods to Quackity.

“And him?”

“Library assistant,” Karl replies, even as Quackity splutters, stubbing his cigarette out on the dirt at his feet.

“I’m a lot more than that, I’m an *entrepreneur*-”

Karl rolls his eyes, but his tone is fond, “Keep telling yourself that, Quackity.”

Sapnap blinks at them both. “You mean to say,” He starts carefully, “That you came out into the wilds, a librarian and a freaking assistant -”

“*Entrepreneur*-”

“Whatever,” Sapnap waves past the interruption, “You came out here with your assistant? How in the name of Prime have you not been killed yet? You stack books for a living!”

“Fuckin’ beats me,” Quackity says, low, and Karl punches him lightly on the arm.

“I don’t just *stack books!* I’m a *learned man*, okay? A keeper of knowledge! I’ve got a pretty good map section back in my library and I know all sorts of things!” He says, and his eyes dart to Sapnap and then away again quickly as Sapnap visibly stiffens, “I know my way around, for instance.”

George grabs Sapnap’s arm. “Sapnap-”

“I already know what you’re going to ask and the answer is *no*, George.”

George pulls him close, talking in a loud voice that Sapnap is certain the others can hear anyway, “You were literally complaining yesterday about getting lost, this is perfect!”

“First of all, I was not *lost*. I said we couldn’t stray from the fucking path. Second of all, and more important, I think, is that we *can’t trust them*.”

“Oh yeah? Well, apparently we can’t trust our sense of direction to get us out of this country without running into every person under the gods damn sun, either, so we need -”

“Ahem,” Quackity clears his throat pointedly, before their bickering spirals into another argument, “Couldn’t help but overhear you’re also headed across the border, is that right?”

Sapnap glares at George, but this is a fight he can already feel himself losing. For being physically stronger than George, he sure ends up losing a lot of fucking fights.

“Yeah.” He acquiesces.

Karl makes a sympathetic noise, “Because of the political mess in the capital, right?”

“Yeah,” Sapnap says, because it’s as good an excuse as any.

“I know a lot of people trying to head out discreetly, same as you,” Karl says with sympathy, and Sapnap bristles.

“What do you mean *discreetly*? We’re not being discreet.”

“Okay,” Karl says, like he doesn’t believe him.

“We aren’t!”

“Uh, dude, you’re camping in the woods,” Karl says, marking them off on his fingers as he goes, “even though there’s a town like a stone’s throw off the path an hour back that way. You keep talking about being chased and lost your shit when you thought your friend got taken like being kidnapped is a normal occurrence, and you are, like, paranoid as fuck with us right now even though I’m a noodle man and Quackity here comes up to our collective knees.”

“Hey!” Quackity shoves him but Karl just locks his arms around Quackity in an oddly competent hold that keeps him pinned as he struggles and curses before eventually huffing and going still. He doesn’t break eye contact the whole time. Sapnap doesn’t like it.

“That’s...” Sapnap trails off, fingers reflexively tightening on Nightmare’s hilt. Fuck. Is it so obvious? He can feel the anxiety prickling at him. Do they look like fugitives? Run-aways? Is it obvious enough that people might report them? Sapnap thought they just looked like travelers. Is there more to this than he thought?

“You get pretty good at people-watching in my job,” Karl shrugs before his face softens and he lets Quackity go, “We’re not stupid. In fact, I think we could help each other.”

“And why in Prime’s name should we trust you?” Sapnap snaps.

“Helping each other would be fuckin’ swell! I’d rather not die to more creepers now that my sword is basically useless.” Quackity says, finally going still in the prison Karl has made with his arms, “We can’t afford another iron sword and you clearly know your way around a weapon and George seems pretty good with a bow.”

George preens at the praise, but Sapnap just clenches his jaw. “Get to the point.”

“Alright, alright, chill out, man,” Quackity holds up his hands, “Look, you’re a fighter. I’m not and Karl is passable but not like...well, not like what you just did with the creepers back there. And we know our way around while you guys apparently don’t. And more specifically, we know how to get out of the country *quietly*. We can help you get to where we’re all going, and you can provide a bit of protection for us until then. You know, seeing as you were so concerned about us just wandering at night with minimal protection. Sounds like a win-win situation all around/to me.”

“We don’t have time to be dragging two more people along with us,” Sapnap replies, “The border to Snowchester is already *weeks* away, you two are just gonna slow us down. And if we’re attacked, I’ll have to protect you.”

“You won’t!” Quackity smacks Karl on the back hard enough to make him jerk forward, “Ol’ string-bean here packs a bigger punch than he looks! And I’m not as useless as you might think. We can take care of ourselves in a fair fight.”

“Nothing about this world is fair, least of all fights,” Sapnap says roughly and prods at the fire. The conversation dies out bitterly. He doesn’t want to think about it, but he can’t.

He scrubs his face.

“Aside from the fights,” Quackity eventually picks up the conversation again, the lull short but harsh enough to soften his voice for a time until he starts to pick up speed again, “If you really want to get out of here without much trouble, you’ve been going in the wrong direction.

“Why’s that?” George asks, leaning against Sapnap suddenly. It snaps Sapnap out of his daze, makes him look up to see Quackity watching them from across the flames.

“Snowchester is allied with Kinoko, they’d sooner give back fugitives than protect them.”

“No one said anything about fugitives,” Sapnap starts but Quackity holds up a hand.

“No offense. I just meant, you know, like refugees and shit. I heard George say something about people coming after you and you *just* mentioned getting into fights. But not fugitives, that’s fine, okay? Either way, the Queen doesn’t like a lot of people, doesn’t mean anything about you personally, man, come on. Anyways, the point is, if you really wanna get out of here and not worry about any big, bad mercenaries or knights or angry husbands or whoever the fuck may or may not be chasing you, the Badlands is probably a better option.”

The worst part is that Quackity isn’t entirely wrong. The Badlands are far more lawless than either Kinoko or Snowchester. It would be easier for George to slip under the radar. Just another human in a land of demons and mob-blooded citizens. On the one hand, there are reasons he didn’t head to his homeland in the first place. On the other, he’s grown up a lot since he was a little half-demon kid hanging onto his dad’s tail as he breezed through the streets, arms full of political negotiations. He’s got a strong sword and good head on his shoulders and it’s a clearer head than those first dizzying weeks on the run with George. It certainly hadn’t been an option back during those weeks; he hadn’t been back outside of being George’s guard and companion in over a decade, and the few places one could cross into a country so naturally protected were heavily guarded and controlled. Without exposing himself and George, it had seemed impossible. He could have got them through - the Badlands are no true allies of Kinoko, after all - but then his parents might have been in trouble. But if they had a guide who said they knew a back way into the country...

Maybe the Badlands aren’t entirely a bad idea. If anything, his father could get his packages to them easier, even if the price involved Sapnap needing to be a lot more cautious about his identity than he would in Snowchester.

“It’s a month’s travel away from here!” Sapnap protests, anyway.

George pipes up, “And isn’t it surrounded by a crazy forest or something like that? I’m pretty sure most humans that have ever gone there have, like, *died*.”

George knows that isn’t true. George has *been* to the Badlands. It makes Sapnap feel safer, that George isn’t laying it all out, that he’s playing a bit of a fool. These last few months, his friend has been fading from the man leaning against Sapnap now, like their loss has drained him, changed him. George is bright and sharp and kind and wicked intelligent. He could run circles around Sapnap if he wanted to when they were younger, but lately, it’s felt almost like George is just...existing. Having lost all that he has, Sapnap understands why. He wishes George would talk to him, open up, just let him *ask* - but he doesn’t, and Sapnap can’t bring himself to push. Now, hearing him engaging with other people, talking, questioning, putting to use some of that political training they’ve been filling his head with since he was born - it’s almost enough to make Sapnap smile.

Karl pipes up, shaking his head, “Not true. Well, the Crimson Forest is a bit of a nightmare, but you can get through easier than you might think. It’s three weeks if you’re quiet, and two if you know what you’re doing.” He grins, mischievous and eyes glinting in the firelight.

Quackity swings an arm around his companion's shoulders.

"And we know what we're doing."

"Rich coming from the two people with no sword and a couple toothpicks between them," Sapnap mutters.

"The pen is mightier than the sword, dude," Karl says, brightly, "And in a pinch, I've got a couple of hardbacks in my bag."

Sapnap drops his head into his hands and groans.

"What do *you* get out of this?" George asks and it's said with a tone learned from trade meetings and lessons that Sapnap wasn't allowed to attend.

"Like I said," Karl says, patting his bag, which makes a heavy *thunk*, and Sapnap reconsiders the faceplant. A hit with that to the head would be lethal. "I'm a collector. Rare books, stories people have forgotten. That kind of stuff goes for a lot of money, in the right circles. The Badlands has a dealer that I've been dying to get to, and if I can avoid getting robbed and left for dead in the meantime, that would be fantastic."

"So if I pay you in protection," Sapnap says, slow, every word already feeling dirty in his mouth for even considering it, "You'll get us into the Badlands safely and... inconspicuously?"

"I mean, a bit of monetary payment wouldn't go amiss -" Quackity starts, but he stops when Karl elbows him good-naturedly.

"Get us there alive, and we'll see," George says, as if this was already a done deal, as if it was already decided.

"George," Sapnap hisses, pulling George back by the arm.

"He's right, Sapnap," George says, much quieter than before, "I've met Snowchester's queen, you know I have; she's more likely to send us right back to the capital the moment she figures out who I am."

"We'll keep you hidden, safe -"

"You know that can't last forever, Sapnap," George says softly, "You *know* me. I couldn't stay and sit pretty and useless in the castle to save my life, it wouldn't be any different in a safe house. I get antsy. At least in the Badlands people are less likely to know who I am. Your dad would be able to help us easier than if we were in Snowchester. It was the best option at the time, but if they really know a way to get us into the Badlands without going through any of the border guards, then the Badlands are better."

"We can't," Sapnap says, throwing a glance at the two strangers over his shoulder, "We can't trust them, George."

"We don't have to trust them," George replies, "We just have to get over the border, and we'll be away from it all. The hunters, the guards, fucking *Schlatt*, all of it. Mistrust them all you want, but right now they're looking like the best chance we have to get away from here for good."

Sapnap considers it for a long, long moment. His gut is telling him no. It's telling him that they're meant to be three, not two, not four. It's telling him that these two people are only going to bring them trouble, Quackity with his silver tongue and Karl with his piercing eyes, both of which make

him uncomfortable and on edge. He wants to go to Snowchester and find a far-off little village and set up a nice house and let George have the simple life he's begged for since he was old enough to realize who and what he was. He wants to get George settled in that far-off, safe little space and then come back and raze that castle to the ground with his bare hands, and all the fucking people in it who caused this, take that throne apart piece by piece. He wants - he wants to see his parents again, and his best friends together again.

But that's what Sapnap wants, not what he has, and Sapnap has rarely ever gotten what he *wants*, even before all this.

"Fine," he says, and then, louder so that their new travelling companions can hear, "*Fine*, you're hired."

"Hell yes," Quackity says, fist-pumping, while Karl's smile gets even wider.

"Thanks, man," he says, "I mean it. I don't know what Quackity would have done if you hadn't been there."

"You too," Sapnap says, begrudgingly, "For helping George when he was being an idiot."

"Hey!" George squawks, settling back down by the fire, "I was not!"

"Were too," Sapnap says, just because he can, and because he knows it's late enough for George that it will stay lighthearted.

Karl and Quackity have finished their food and Quackity is yawning. He looks tired, keeps closing his eyes in blinks that drag on longer and longer. Karl looks as fresh as a daisy, but Sapnap can spot the strain in the corners of his eyes.

"You three can sleep." He heaves himself up off the ground, letting George flounder without his support, and sits on their enderchest. He pulls Nightmare into his lap, takes out the cloth he uses to clean her. He won't sharpen the blade again, but running a cloth over its body until it shines has brought him the only peace he's known in months, and he desperately needs it.

"Sapnap," George attempts, but Sapnap just shakes his head. He won't be able to rest even if he tries. The soreness from all the tumbles is starting to set in. He's gonna be hurting come morning and it's better if he eases into it rather than if he just wakes up in the midst of the ache.

"...I'll stay up, too." Karl settles across the fire, looking unsure of his welcome despite the relative victory he's achieved since they met.

"Sleep." Sapnap says pointedly. "You saved George. You've earned a night of rest, at least."

It takes very little insistence, in the end. They're all exhausted, just as he is, but much less stubborn about it. George drapes Sapnap's discarded cloak around Sapnap's shoulders with a "Stay warm, at least, idiot." before he passes out in his bed. Quackity and Karl share Sapnap's, curling up close under Karl's heinously patterned cloak. Quackity completely disappears under it. All that sticks out of Karl is his hair.

Sapnap hears them whispering, hears a high-pitched giggle abruptly cut off, and watches the cloak shift and shudder as they get comfortable before it goes still. Moments later, gentle snoring and deep breathing are the only sounds filling the camp.

Sapnap heaves a great sigh, leans back, and looks up at the sky.

"Life would be much easier for me if you were here," he says into the air and watches the smoke of the fire disappear into the night.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Thank you all so much for the lovely comments and kudos!!! We appreciate them so much and you appreciate you!!! <3

First, this chapter contains a lil story that is very near and dear to us - it's the reason we're friends, so!! We hope you enjoy it, you'll know it when you see it.

cw for this chapter: Panic attacks, and disregarding personal safety for someone else. Remember, your comfort comes first!

Also - we are updating wednesdays and sundays!!! So subscribe if you want to get the chapter as soon as it comes out!!

Sapnap is by a river. He feels happy and relaxed, toes in the water for tadpoles to nibble at and arms stretched high above his head. In the distance, he hears his dad's familiar, comforting voice and George's carefree laughter. He thinks Alyssa and Callahan aren't far away, though he can't hear them, and Sam is definitely somewhere close by with Ponk, probably holding hands and hiding it from Bad's sight.

He feels Dream by his side, but he can't see him because his eyes are closed. Dream just has a presence, a familiar one that makes Sapnap feel safe.

"How's it?" Dream asks. For some reason, the sound of his voice brings Sapnap to tears.

"Sucks." He says honestly. "I miss you, man."

"I miss you, too." Dream shuffles closer. They aren't touching, but Sapnap can still feel that Dream is closer.

"When are you coming back?" Sapnap can't help but ask. Dream doesn't answer. Sapnap tries to blink, but his eyes are so heavy. He leaves them closed. "I can't do this on my own. How am I supposed to keep George safe, Dream? That's your job. He only ever listened to you."

"You're doing a good job, Pandas." Dream says and the smile is there, right in his voice.

"Not like you would have."

"You're not me. But I'm not you, either."

"We're supposed to be a team. How could you just leave? Where are you?"

"Wake up, Sapnap." Dream says and Sapnap doesn't even have time to get angry before he's blinking his eyes open to the sound of hushed whispers around the fire.

George is one of them. When he turns his head, he finds that fluffy brown hair is poking out from under the ugly cloak.

When he tilts his head back, it's to see Quackity and George with their heads together, poking at a book Sapnap assumes is one of Karl's.

"What are you two idiots scheming?" He sits up, stretching. The aches aren't as bad as they were only a few hours before dawn, when the adrenaline had finally died out enough that he made the call to shake Karl awake to take him up on being covered, who had forced Quackity to do it, instead. Sapnap had crawled into the bed with George, who'd made room like he'd been waiting, and passed out.

Despite the bitterness of the dream, it left him feeling - lighter, somehow. He feels rested, if still tired.

"Reading up on the Crimson Forest." George doesn't look up from the book but Quackity snaps his head up. In the morning light, Sapnap is able to get a much clearer look at him. He's around their age and he looks *soft*, the kind of soft that would have made Sapnap go harder on him in training if they were still at the castle. Now, it just makes him a little worried. As annoyed as he is about them tagging along, he doesn't want either of them to get hurt just because they thought they'd lucked out on a good swordsman to escort them through dangerous territories.

"You look less old and grumpy in the daylight." Quackity grins at him, another cigarette hanging loosely from his fingers, smoke billowing over the top of the book. Sapnap flushes, frowning.

"Shut up."

"Yeah, shut up," George finally stops reading the book and nudges Quackity, "He looks old and grumpy all the time, stop trying to get on his good side."

"Hey!"

Quackity cackles and he laughs with his whole body. It's only a few seconds before he slaps a hand over his mouth and goes quiet but Sapnap still grumbles and turns away to start preparing breakfast.

Quackity goes to rouse Karl while Sapnap takes stock of their supplies. It makes him a little nervous. Even if Quackity and Karl brought their own food, Sapnap has a feeling they won't last for long. They'll have to make a pitstop for food in the next week or two, which makes Sapnap nervous, especially after how easily Karl read them last night.

Still, that's for later. For now, he pulls five rations from the chest and closes it back up.

Karl is up, sleepy-eyed, poking uselessly at the wrong part of the fire.

"Prime." Sapnap says to himself and marches over, manhandling the stick from Karl's loose grip and building the fire up himself, "Do I need to chew for you, too?"

"Oh, would you?" Karl points at his mouth, "Mama bird me, Sapnap."

"Ew," George pulls a face, "That's actually disgusting, Karl, what the fuck."

"What?" Karl shrugs, "I'm always down to try something once."

Sapnap feels his brain boiling in his own head, just for a second. Fuck's sake.

"Just. Eat." he slaps an apple into Karl's hand and turns to Quackity to do the same. He flicks the stub of his cigarette into the fire and takes the apple from Sapnap's hand.

Quackity looks at the apple thoughtfully, then back up at Sapnap, "I think if you chew Karl's food, you have to do the same for me because of equality."

"Q!" Karl gasps dramatically, "Are you going after my mama bird?"

"I will literally skewer you both on my sword and leave you for dead." Sapnap says seriously, and they both pipe down.

George just eats his apple to hide his smile, but Sapnap can see it *through* the red skin of his fruit. To distract himself from his growing irritation, he chomps into his portion as loud as he can.

Camp breaks up soon after, he and George packing away the tent and beds while Quackity puts out the fire and Karl scribbles in a notebook. Sapnap leaves the fifth ration by the remains of the fire, a small apple and a piece of spiced jerky, the last of what they'd brought from the castle. Karl looks at it curiously and Quackity follows his eyes and then looks, too.

"An offering?" Karl guesses.

"No." Sapnap bites out.

"Don't ask about that." George cuts in, "Let's just go, okay? Which way are we going? We've decided on the Badlands, right?"

Karl drags his eyes away from the last ration, nodding absentmindedly, "Mhm, Badlands. We need to head directly south."

"Back toward the capital?" Sapnap frowns, "I don't think..."

"Yes, and no." Karl holds out a hand and Quackity puts the book he and George had been studying in his reach. Karl props it open against his knees, finishing off his apple as he flips through pages casually until -

"There. Yep, we're going to go toward the capital but veer southwest and make a large arc around. We can use the mountain pass to keep out of the way of the main roads. We'll be approaching the Badlands from the west, not straight on and we'll slip in through the Crimson Forest."

"And you guys will be able to handle the swamp?" Sapnap looks the two of them over critically, "There are magma cubes, wither skeletons, hoglins, *piglins* -"

"Just trust us!" Quackity pats Karl's hair, "Despite his fashion choices, he's not bad to have around."

"Thank you, sweetheart." Karl pats Quackity's hand on his head right back, missing the eye roll he gets in response.

"Don't call me that," Quackity says with a snooty wrinkle of his nose, "I demand *respect* be put on my name!"

"Yeah, okay." Karl snorts, "You got it, Big Q. Nothing but respect for my assistant."

"Thank you." Quackity tosses his hair, except he still has his beanie on so nothing happens except for the slight twitch of the ends peeking under the edges of the hat. Sapnap refuses to let himself laugh.

"Anyway," Karl goes back to his book, "If nothing goes wrong, we'll get there in less than three weeks,"

"That's a big if." Sapnap says, rolling his eyes.

"Oh, come on, it isn't! Trust us." Karl bats his pretty eyes and Sapnap looks away before he gets caught staring at how they've changed from dark gray to a gentle blue in the sunlight.

"Absolutely not."

Quackity boos loudly and George finally breaks into the giggles Sapnap knows he's been holding back the whole morning. Three against one, Sapnap isn't ever winning shit again.

"This is a fucking nightmare." He says loudly and shoulders the enderchest.

Karl and Quackity fit next to him and George easily. He doesn't like it, doesn't want to admit it, but he can see the appeal to them when George trips on a rock and Quackity spends ten minutes roasting him over it.

It's not as fun when Quackity does it to him, but he thinks he must scare the guy a little because all it takes is a well-timed glance to make Quackity duck behind Karl and drop the teasing for at least an hour. He silently smokes three cigarettes until George has a fight with a tree, his nose the weapon and injury all in one, and Quackity nearly cries laughing.

They keep up well, too. Karl only stops to consult his maps every handful of hours, checks the sun and a compass he keeps in one of the many pockets of his cloak. Otherwise, he points Sapnap in a direction and lets him set the pace. Sapnap is careful not to push them too hard, but Quackity only complains once about their speed, and it's only because the terrain is starting to get a little rocky and his balance is a little thrown due to his vision.

"Sorry." He hears Quackity mutter to Karl at one point as Karl helps him down from a short cliff, "I'm so fuckin' slow, sorry, you wanted to get through here before nightfall, shit -"

"Quackity," Karl says back, just as quiet, "You're doing fine. We were going really fast, I for one appreciate that we aren't being marched like knights anymore."

Quackity huffs, lands with a soft *oof* of exertion. "Stop saying nice shit just to make me feel better."

"Why else would I say nice shit, then?" Karl laughs, low and private, like Sapnap shouldn't be listening in.

"Because you mean it?"

"I always mean to make you feel better, Big Q."

"Stop flirting with me, you're going to fall."

"Fall for you, I know." Karl preens and it makes Quackity laugh, dispels the dark mood that had begun to fall around when he's started to lag behind no matter how much slower Sapnap paced them.

Sapnap doesn't look behind him, but he does call for a break ten minutes later, complaining of a stone in his boot. If he waits until Quackity has caught his breath and recovered some energy, no one has to know but George, who keeps giving him knowing looks that he ignores.

"Stone, huh?" George settles at his side once they're on the move again.

"It happens," Sapnap says defensively. "Mind your fucking business."

"Okay, Pandas." George laughs, loud and happy, and Sapnap remembers his dream, that familiar laughter from a long, long time ago. He thinks he could put up with the teasing, to get that returned after so long. George hasn't laughed like that since before -

Since before.

George lets it go, but he catches Karl's considering glance over the fire that night and he responds with a shrug without thinking about it. This time, neither he nor Quackity talk about the fifth portion he lays out.

Quackity falls asleep almost while still eating and George isn't much better, though that might just be because George can fall asleep anywhere at the drop of a hat. George at least makes it to a bed. Quackity just slowly starts to list over and Karl tucks himself in just in time for Quackity to lean on his shoulder as he falls to the pull of sleep.

Sapnap watches them through the fire.

"He can have my bed." He offers a little uselessly.

"Okay." Karl says but doesn't move. Quackity continues to sleep, silent except for his steady breathing. Sapnap is struck, once again, by how young he looks, all the worry of wakefulness drawn out of him. In sleep, and in the firelight, his scar is just another part of him; not twisting his smile or impeding his vision. A young man, that's all. His chest tightens, and Sapnap resists the urge to take hold of Nightmare. There's an echo of a hand on his shoulder, the whisper of the person he thought would always have his back; Be careful, be slow, be steady, and you'll be ready for anything when you can no longer afford to be all three.

He and Karl sit in comfortable quiet. He'll take first watch, and he knows Karl will take second. Sapnap hopes Quackity will take third just so George won't have the opportunity to run off again. But night hasn't fully fallen yet, and he takes some time to let himself relax. Not fully, Nightmare still stays at hand, but he lets himself lean back against the enderchest and chew on his hardtack.

"We made good time today." Karl eventually says, shifting when Quackity does to keep his support in place.

"We'll go slower tomorrow." Sapnap nods, answering the unspoken request.

"We don't need to." Karl smiles. Sapnap smiles back, just a little. They'll go slower.

"You're pretty nice, for being old and grumpy."

Sapnap loses the smile and Karl laughs sharply before slapping a hand over his mouth and going still. Quackity mumbles on his shoulder and Karl's eyes curl up with a hidden grin.

"I'm not." Sapnap tries to sound firm, but it mostly just sounds kinda whiney.

"You are, a little." Karl tilts his head, leans it on Quackity's. "It's okay. I like a nice man, you know."

"Okay?"

"Just so you know." Karl winks. For some reason, it flusters him.

"Go to bed, Karl." He says instead of confronting it, or Karl, "You're up in a few hours."

"Sending me to bed already? I can't get away with anything here!"

Sapnap purposefully doesn't answer or look at him. He hears Karl's amused huff of laughter, hears him gentle Quackity awake with a few whispered words, hears them stumble to his bed and crawl in under Karl's cloak as they do each night.

"G'night, Sapnap." Quackity mumbles from under the blanket.

"Good night." He echoes back. Karl laughs again and Sapnap feels like he's lost, somehow.

As the darkness falls, Sapnap finds himself unable to stop thinking of the way Quackity had fallen asleep, gentle like snowfall on Karl's shoulder, or the way Karl had gone totally still for the first time that day, just so he wouldn't disturb him.

The rocky ground only gets more so over the next few days. They add Quackity and Karl to their usual games. Quackity completely loses at the alphabet game but Karl is insanely good even from the beginning. It leads to Quackity making both lunch and dinner for the next two days.

Sapnap notices that he pulls five rations each time and a small part of him feels...seen. Like George won't acknowledge it, but this strange man will. He and Karl don't even get fussed about leaving it behind for someone or something else to take, despite the next town not being available for restocking until they pass over a small mountain.

"It'll take two days, I'd estimate." Karl pokes at his book thoughtfully as they stand at the foot of said mountain. It's tall, but no taller than many others that Sapnap has seen and conquered before. "Maybe less if we make good time."

"We can make good time." Sapnap says.

"We can." Karl agrees, but his eyes cut to Quackity and back to Sapnap, and Sapnap nods to reassure him. Quackity isn't that slow, but he tires out quickly. If he's used to travel, it isn't over rocky terrain. Karl will match his pace either way, so it isn't worth separating the party just to be a dick. They'll go at the pace Quackity can manage.

"Hey!" Quackity yells, "George, not fair! I helped you! Help me!"

"Prime's sake." Sapnap is saying before he even turns around. Those two are like an unstable potion. He looks away for a second and suddenly they've exploded.

This time, he turns just in time to see George pulling Quackity up onto a rock nearly three times Sapnap's height. The only way they can reach the top is by boosting each other and then spidering up the space between the rock and another one.

"No." Sapnap says immediately, heading over, "Absolutely not. Get the fuck down right now."

"Sapnap, listen," George calls down, "You can see the whole forest we just walked through!"

"Sick, that's, like, so fuckin' cool, dude! Get down!"

"You okay, Big Q?" Karl comes to stand next to Sapnap, "Ol' Georgie?"

"We're fine!" Quackity waves down at them and Karl waves back with a laugh. Sapnap feels like an aneurysm would be less painful than this.

"I can only carry one of you if you fall," Sapnap warns them, low-grade worry in his gut.

"They'll be okay." Karl pats his arm lightly. "Actually, I bet I'd get a great view of the weather from up there. Boost me?"

"No!" Sapnap throws a hand up, "It's too dangerous! I want them *down*, not you *up*!"

"But I need to see the weather." Karl reasons, "So I know if we have any bad stuff coming our way. It's better to take a little risk now so we can be prepared rather than to go in blind, isn't it?"

"Karl." Sapnap glowers but Karl just smiles at him. His eyes are almost purple today, owing to the new way he's wrapped his cloak around himself.

Karl ends up using Sapnap's hand as a boost, with Quackity and George grabbing his hands from up top and pulling him up. It leaves Sapnap the only one below, with no way to get to the top except to climb. Part of him wants to go up to join them, but the rest of him knows that *someone* is going to fall and he's the only one strong enough to catch them.

"See!?" Karl yells from the top, "I was right! I see rain clouds."

"Gods damn it." Sapnap gives in and rubs his face. He's going to rub his eyebrows off at this rate. "How far away is it!?"

"I'll bet it will hit tomorrow morning. We can make it mostly over today and camp out tonight. When the rain passes, we'll make it the rest of the way down and go into town for supplies."

"Sounds like a plan to me." George stands up on the top of the rock and peers the way they came. "It really is beautiful, Sap."

"I'm glad," Sapnap says, and he is. "Can you come the fuck down now?"

Dream would have climbed up with him. There was a time when Sapnap would have, too. Sapnap doesn't want to think about those times right now, though.

"Fine, killjoy, I'll come down." George looks one last time at the forests behind them and then down at Sapnap. Sapnap watches the daredevil smile grow on his face and feels the dread. "Sapnap, catch me!"

"What?" Sapnap backs up, shaking his head, "No. No. Climb down."

"There's no way! You'll have to catch me!" George puts his feet over the edge of the rock, slides down a little until only the strength of his arms is holding him at the top. He's not up *too* far. Sapnap could just -

"George, *no!*"

"Don't you dare drop me!" George warns and then flings himself off the edge of the rock. Sapnap practically trips with how fast he moves forward, arms flailing wildly before George barrels into him with a gleeful shriek. He manages to catch him but it knocks them both over and onto the hard ground. George laughs from where he's wrapped his arms and legs around Sapnap like he's a tree and Sapnap groans long and low at the dull ache of his ass from where he'd fallen right down.

"You *bitch*. You fucking *bitch*." He curses, "I can't believe you just jumped."

"You caught me, idiot!"

“I should have just let you fall!”

“But you didn’t!” George pinches his cheeks, “Now smile! I’m so sick of that face of yours looking so dour.”

“Not really a smiling situation.” Sapnap grumbles, but not even he can manage to not smile with George’s grin at full watts right in his face.

“Let me down.” George wiggles and Sapnap does drop him then, right onto the ground next to him, which he lands on with a *woof* of escaped air.

“Dick.”

“*Don’t* even with me right now, you’re lucky I don’t find the nearest lake to drown you.” Sapnap warns and stands up. Karl and Quackity are still on the rock and Karl is laughing so hard he’s had to sit down, while Quackity’s shoulders shake in that oddly quiet way he gets when he thinks something is especially funny. “Your turn, Tweedle-dee and Tweedle-dum. Down.”

“Will you catch me, Sapnap?” Karl flutters his eyelashes playfully, “I think I weigh less than George.”

“No.” Sapnap says firmly, “Don’t you fucking throw yourself off that rock, Karl, I swear to Prime.”

“Okay, okay.” Karl looks down and then at Quackity, “Help me down? I’ll drop and then help you, okay?”

Quackity shrugs, looking unbothered, and Sapnap watches with careful eyes as Quackity holds Karl’s hands and Karl starts to climb down. He finds himself at the wall of the rock, reaching up to steady Karl’s legs and then his hips.

“You can drop him.” He tells Quackity and, when Karl nods and Quackity lets go, he swings Karl back to safety.

“Thanks.” Karl smiles, throwing an arm around Sapnap’s shoulders in an affectionate side hug, “Coulda twisted my ankle there!”

“I’m gonna twist your neck in a second,” Sapnap warns but doesn’t push him. He turns back to Quackity, who still stands on top, looking down on them. With the sun behind him, Sapnap can’t make out his face. He’s just a shadow, looking down at the three of them silently. Sapnap thinks he looks so lonely, suddenly. He wants him off the rock now.

“Okay, Q.” He hesitates and then waves, “You still good up there? Ready to come down?”

Quackity shifts and suddenly Sapnap can see his features again, a slightly worried smile on his face. “I don’t think I thought this through.”

“None of you did.” Sapnap agrees, “But I’ll help anyway. I want you to do what George did, but less violent, okay? Just slide down the side of the rock. We’ll catch you.”

“Uh.” Quackity looks between Sapnap and Karl, “I don’t know about that.”

“You could climb down.” Karl offers, pointing at the crack that they used to get up in the first place. “It’ll bring you a little closer to the ground but then you have to jump further.”

“Just slide down.” Sapnap pats the side of the rock, “You see me right here, yeah? Even if you fall,

you'll land on me, right?"

"You'll get hurt." Quackity snorts, "Oh, shit, I land on you and you break a leg or something and then we spend the next month protecting you while you heal up and once your leg is solid again, you just kick my ass until I die for breaking it in the first place. That's how that would end."

"You will not break my leg." Sapnap reasons, "If anything, you'll break my arm."

Karl elbows him hard in the side, "What he *means* is that you won't break anything. Sapnap is solid as a rock, isn't he? You saw him take that flying George to the face earlier, didn't you? This right here," Karl slaps Sapnap's chest twice, a *thunk-thunk* against the muscle there, "This baby can take so many flying men into his arms. He's made for it."

"Yeah." Sapnap agrees.

Quackity's shoulders shake with laughter, but he still looks unsure, "Are you sure, Sapnap?"

"I'm sure." Sapnap slides into place directly below Quackity's position, reaching his arms up, "Come on. Slide down. I'll catch you."

"He's so dreamy." Karl sighs and Sapnap has the urge to smack him but it would involve taking his arms down so he just kicks him instead. While Karl whines and howls about the injury, Quackity carefully flattens himself against the side of the rock and starts to lower himself down. He's shorter than Karl and doesn't quite reach Sapnap's hand when he reaches the point where he has to let go.

"Oh, fuck. Fucking fuck." Sapnap hears him say, voice a little high.

"You're safe, Q." Karl calls, "Sapnap's right there and I'm right here, too. We got you. Just let go."

"This sucks. I'm not following George ever again."

"Hey, this isn't my fault. If you just jumped, Sapnap would have caught you, too."

"Thank you for not jumping on me like a fucking child." Sapnap gripes back. "Seriously, Q. I'm right here. Can you feel my fingers?" He reaches up on his tiptoes, just manages to brush Quackity's ankles, "See?"

"Y-yeah. Yeah, I feel you." Quackity breathes out a steadyng breath. "Okay. I'm letting go."

"One..." Sapnap starts to count, "Two...Three!"

Quackity legs go. He shrieks as he starts to fall but Karl and Sapnap both strike forward at the same time. As soon as he slides into reach, Sapnap is grabbing his legs, slowing his fall as his hands carefully glide up to his hips and Karl is supporting his back, keeping him from tipping away from the rock. They slow his descent until Sapnap can grip him firmly at the hips and help him safely drop to the ground, all four of them back firmly where they belong.

"Oh." Quackity blinks, looking between them, "You caught me."

"Yep." Sapnap says because his hands are on Quackity's hips and it's the closest the two of them have ever been, he comes to realize. He smells faintly of nicotine but more overpowering is the smell of the pine that George pushed him into earlier, or the mushroom stew that Karl made for lunch.

"Thank you." Quackity blinks again, this time at Sapnap. His brown eye is big and wide and still a

little wet from what Sapnap is sure were involuntary tears from the fall, his blue eye in a similar state. He's looking at Sapnap's face for what Sapnap is also realizing may be one of the first times. He hadn't realized how much Quackity avoided eye contact until this moment. His hands tighten involuntarily on his hips.

"You're welcome."

"Your hands are...getting warm." Quackity squirms in his grip a little and Sapnap releases him like he's just touched a block of ice.

"Sorry! Sorry! Are you okay? Did I burn you?"

"No, I'm fine." Quackity brushes his shirt out, "You're hot but not *that* hot, hotstuff."

"Oh, hotstuff. 'Cause he's hot and because he's a fire demon. I like it." Karl offers a high five and Quackity slaps their palms together with a "Hell yeah, baby!"

"I should have just left you both up there," Sapnap says with regret and turns around to find George. George has wandered off, but only a little. Far enough away that Sapnap would be worried if they were still in the forest, but he's just found a seat near a crevice Sapnap knows is shallow enough to not be a worry and has been watching them all with a raised brow that Sapnap doesn't like.

"Get the fuck over here." Sapnap motions aggressively, "You started this shit and then go and retire to the fuckin' parlor while I help everyone down. Dick."

"Yes, because you looked like you minded so much." George breezes past him with a smirk, "Let's go, Karl. Onward and upward and all that."

Karl laughs, bright and smug, and winks at Sapnap again before falling into step with George. Quackity is quieter than usual, but he grins when Sapnap glances at him to check in and Sapnap has to shove down a smile of his own on instinct.

Fuck.

"We should never have trusted you," Sapnap says, and George rolls his eyes in response.

"Don't be dramatic, it's just a little rain," George replies, and Sapnap scoffs.

"You're calling me dramatic? The sky wants to drown us and you're calling *me* dramatic?"

The rain falls in sheets outside, blocking them off from the rest of the world. The four of them have hidden in a small cave huddled around the embers of a damp fire. George has two blankets pulled over his shoulders and is still complaining. Karl has been curled over his books to protect them from any kind of water damage. Since Sapnap banned him from smoking in the small space, Quackity has been tapping out patterns rapidly on the stone wall.

Sapnap is at least glad the cave is dry. He doesn't think he could take their complaints about being soaking wet on top of everything else. The rain had started the day before, earlier than Karl had predicted, beginning with a light drizzle that already had George complaining and eventually turned into a downpour of apocalyptic proportions. Eventually, when Quackity had slipped on the rocks for the third time in a row and the lightning flashed a little too close for comfort, they decided to hole up before nightfall and wait for it to pass.

Sapnap hadn't missed the way that George kept glancing in his direction; fire demons and the rain didn't mix particularly well. Despite wanting to get to the Badlands as quickly as they could, Sapnap was secretly glad that they had found shelter before his skin started to steam and his limbs got shaky. At least if they were attacked, he could still do something.

"No one can control the weather, Sapnap," George says reasonably, "Now come here, I'm cold."

Sapnap huffs, but leaves the mouth of the cave to sit down next to George anyway, and George pulls his blankets around them both.

"Is this what I've been reduced to?" Sapnap says, "A heater?"

"Yup!" George chirps and Sapnap sighs, closing his eyes as he consciously tries to raise his body temperature from just above human to the perfect George's-personal-hot-water-bottle temperature.

When Sapnap opens his eyes again, Quackity has stopped tapping his fingers, instead watching the steam curling up from the floor with a careful eye. Sapnap glares at him, as if daring him to say something, but it's Karl, glancing up from his books, that speaks first.

"Dude, that's awesome! Not a lot of demon-kind have that kind of control over their body temperature; can you do anything else?"

Karl only seems eager to learn something new, but Sapnap bristles all the same. He's got enough shit about his heritage as a kid and teenager training in the castle to be defensive when words like that come up, even from someone as nice as Karl.

"It's none of your business," He says, a little smoke exhaling from his mouth as he speaks. Karl's eyes immediately widened, and he backpedals gracelessly.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to upset you or anything,"

"You didn't *upset* me--"

"I was just curious, you can tell me to shut up if you want, Quackity does it all the time -"

"Karl," Sapnap fixes him with a look, "Shut up."

Karl's mouth snaps shut, and he turns back to the book in his lap. Despite his heat and the slowly warming body of George, the temperature in the cave feels chilly. Outside, the rain patters on, no rhyme or reason. It is better than the silence that follows them.

"Hey, Karlos," Quackity says, a light rustle of paper as he gave up and rolled a new smoke, followed by the scrape of a flint and steel as he lights the cigarette "You got a good story there?"

"I've been thinking about one, because of the Badlands. It's a good story." Karl says, "Dunno if you could count it as a happy one."

"Better than nothing," Quackity replies, leaning back against the cave wall with his hands under his head, "Come on, tell us a story, bookkeeper."

George perks up beside him, "Oh my gods, yes, I haven't heard a proper story in ages. Sapnap never remembers them properly."

"I've got more important things to be thinking about!" Sapnap protests, "Like keeping you safe! It's not my job to fill your head with pointless fluff."

“It’s not pointless,” Karl frowns, “Some stories need to be told.”

“Then get tellin’” Quackity replies, impatient, “Or I’m gonna fall asleep.”

“And we’ll have to deal with his snoring, and no one wants to do that,” Sapnap points out, and Quackity gives him an outraged look. Despite himself, Sapnap feels a smile pulling at his lips. The tension bleeds out of the room, even if Sapnap can still feel his shoulders tense under the blanket. Smoke curls around the cave but for once it’s comforting, wood chips and nicotine and damp moss.

“Do you want this story or not?” Karl asks, and George elbows Sapnap to get him to hush and relax. Maybe the rain *is* making him feel more tense than usual. A story would be nice.

“We do, come on, Karl!” George whines, settling back into Sapnap’s warmth.

“Okay, okay,” Karl laughs. It’s objectively a very nice laugh, a fact that Sapnap has resolutely ignored ever since it first popped up in his consciousness, “So it, uh, it starts at the beginning of everything. Before there was the world, before the Nether, even before the End, there was Mother Earth, and her shadow, who loved her. Some say she is Prime, some say she is before Prime. What we do know is that all things are of her and she loves them deeply, endlessly. And because she loves them, her shadow craves them, and so she gives each to her shadow. The texts are confusing, he could be her hero, father, brother, husband, son, enemy, or maybe even all at the same time. But the only thing he ever loves is her. It’s why he craves what she loves - he wants all of it for himself, a neverending voice of emptiness that only her love can attempt to fill.”

“Sounds toxic.” George comments quietly, eyes big and wide. Sapnap notices Quackity shift, inhaling smoke sharply and burying his face in the collar of Karl’s cloak, which Karl had draped around him earlier.

“Shh, listen. The mother loved so much that even she couldn’t contain it. So she buried all the love that overflowed into the ground and out of that love bloomed her paradise and from *that* love grew a being, more beautiful than any that came before. He was her most precious child, the perfect creation, and all that saw him knew love, for he *was* love. His love spilled into the land, creating fresh water for all, bursting fruit ripe with sweetness, and when mankind, who was created from Mother Earth but was not of her in the same way all other things were, came to his paradise, he loved them without reason or consequence, infallibly.”

Sapnap hadn’t expected this from Karl. Okay, he knew the man was a librarian, but a storyteller, too? The only stories he remembered were read in the dry voice of his tutor or made up on a whim from his father, filled with morals and lessons to be learned. This was like nothing else; the solemnity that Karl spoke with, the way his voice rose and fell like crashing waves as he painted a legend in a dark and tiny cave. Even Quackity, sat in shadow and smoke, was listening intently, his fingers still save for those holding his cigarette. He had seemingly been about to fall asleep, but that plan had been abandoned rather quickly.

“Love would doom him, in the end,” Karl continues, “Because Mother Earth loved and loved so much, and because her shadow loved only her but desired all else, her love for her shadow was so great that when her shadow asked for her most perfect child, her pride and joy, who was she to deny him? And yet, for all that he was her child, a child made of love itself, it could not fulfill a shadow.”

“RIP.” George mutters quietly to break the tension and it pulls a half-hearted chuckle from Sapnap. He can’t help but be engaged, though, can’t help but dread the end of this not-so-happy story.

Karl takes a long pause, pushes the fire around and sets another log in it to be eaten up slowly.

When he starts again, his voice is strong and steady, somber. “The shadow stole into the hearts and minds of men, pointed them to war, pointed them to greed. They made axes of the stones in the child’s rivers, they cut down the fruit trees and killed all the animals that had once lived in paradise, using them to make weapons and armor, and they went to war. So great was the bloodshed that the very skin of the child of love was stained red forevermore, and the fresh rivers dried up, clogged as they were with iron and bodies.”

Sapnap winces, sitting back and taking George with him. George doesn’t struggle, too intent on Karl’s words to worry about what position he’s currently sitting in. Sapnap holds on tighter. He knows war, his homeland is notorious for it. If not for George and Dream, Sapnap may have fought in many more than he’d yet to face.

“The child of love screamed as his forests were razed to the ground under marching boots and cruel, pointless battle, but he had been a gift from Mother Earth to her shadow, and she could not take him back. She wept for her creation when all of them were dead and her tears put out the fires and washed away the traces of war. And then she wept until all that was left was a barren desert where once there had been paradise and her tears salted the grounds, cursing them to never grow anything again. She wept for her precious child, but no tears could save him from the madness of grief for what he once had loved. She came to him then, finally, as he lay in the tatters of what he had once been, but the shadow was already there, whispering tales of revenge against men, whom the child had welcomed into himself with all the love that he was. For the child was love, was born in it and made of it, and the shadow took that love and turned it into hate, into rage, until a heart that had once been pure and beautiful was as stained and tainted as his land.”

Karl coughed, clearing his throat, his finger under the line that he reads, quiet and rehearsed; “And as the final leaf burned to ash within his lands, so did the child’s love for all things created and all things of man.”

There is a long pause, until George sits up sharply, elbow sharp in Sapnap’s gut. “That’s it? What happens next?”

“I don’t know,” Karl says, shrugging, “The rest of the story is lost to time, if there even is anything else. We have Prime now as the predominant religion. A lot of other historians focus on the sky pantheon, keeping their legends alive. This one was almost lost entirely.”

There’s a wrinkle in George’s brow, the one that often accompanied hard maths problems or when faced with a riddle he couldn’t solve. “But does the child get his revenge? Does he escape the shadow? If he was *literally* love, does he -” He cuts himself off, and Sapnap can feel the motions of his hands twisting under the blanket, an anxious gesture that he never quite grew out of, “Does he get to love again?”

“I suppose that’s up to you,” Karl says, “The best stories are like that; the ones you get to finish yourself.”

“I think it’s fucking lazy,” Quackity says, stubbing out his cigarette on the pale stone with a seemingly unwarranted amount of force, “They can’t be bothered to think up an ending on their own, so they make us do it. And isn’t a story supposed to have meaning or something, what’s the point of that one? He deserves to escape the shadow. It’s fucked up. He deserves to escape.”

“Sometimes a story is just a story, Q,” Karl says, “Or it can be whatever you make of it. Hey, I didn’t write it. Just keeping the story alive.”

“It’s sad,” George says, quietly, “He lost everything. Even himself.” George sucks in a breath suddenly, putting a hand to his head.

“One of your migraines?” Sapnap asks, and George nods, face scrunched up.

“Just a little one,” He says, “It’s already clearing up, don’t worry too much.”

“You know,” Karl says, putting his book back into his bag, “Some scholars think that that legend is where we get hybrids from.”

Quackity raises an eyebrow, “Huh?”

“Yeah, like a reaction to the land being so damaged. They even think that the Badlands is roughly where it was, you know, with it having such a high concentration of hybrids and that soul sand valley to the south. And, well, the deadly Crimson Forest. It’s where the child of love supposedly slumbers to this day.”

“Oh? So Sapnap’s a swamp monster, got it.” George says, sticking out his tongue as Sapnap splutters.

“Alright, no more hot water bottle time for you, you’ve just revoked your own privileges,” Sapnap shoves George off his lap, and scoots closer to Karl without really realizing it. He goes stock still when Karl suddenly throws his arms around him.

“Hey, Sapnap, if I call you a rare and stunningly handsome creature from the legends of old, do I get hot water bottle privileges?”

Sapnap is on the verge of saying no, of pulling away, but George is pouting at his loss, and Quackity is eyeing them both with an inscrutable expression that’s somewhere between sulking and frowning, both with no real heat behind it. And hey, it’ll piss George off.

“You’re the only person that gets it from now on,” Sapnap says, a smile on his face, straightening out his shoulders so Karl can get a better grip, “I require compliments before I become the living hot water bottle.”

“What!?” George splutters, but Quackity is already leaning forward with a grin.

“Oh gracious Sapnap, fearless protector, greatest hunter -”

“Needs a bit more than that,” Sapnap replies, as Karl curls his way onto Sapnap’s back like a koala.

“World’s most talented swordsman,” Quackity continues, illustrating his point with grand gestures.

“Good, good -”

“Best creeper bait -”

“And you’ve lost it. Nice one.”

“Yeah, you gotta do better than that,” Karl says, voice muffled from where he’s got his face buried in Sapnap’s shoulder. Sapnap’s never been one for hugs, apart from his friends, but he has to admit; this is really nice. Really, really nice. Karl’s somehow managed to get Sapnap in the vee of his legs, knees knocking against Sapnap’s ribs and chin tucked over his shoulder, arms secure around chest, snuggled in close.

“You just called him handsome and climbed on!” Quackity protests, and even with his skin as warm as it, Sapnap can feel Karl’s blush. Huh.

“Worked, didn’t it?”

George scrunches up his nose, all of that royal breeding in one expression, “I didn’t know Sapnap was so vain.”

“S not vain if it’s true.” Sapnap says, and Quackity breaks into loud laughter, wiping his eyes to get rid of fake tears, as if to illustrate his point, before he quiets down almost immediately.

“*Sapnap*,” George starts, in that particular tone of voice he only ever reserved for his two best friends, but it sends Quackity into another bout of giggles.

“*Sapnap*,” He mocks, in a high pitched voice, putting on a mimicry of George’s accent, “Oooh Sapnap, my name is George and I’m sad because I can’t get my cuddles,”

“I do *not* sound like that,”

“Ooooh, I do *not* sound like that, my name is George and I definitely do *not* sound like that -”

“That’s it,” George says, and launches himself at Quackity. Pebbles from the cave floor go flying everywhere as George tackles the other man to the ground, pulling and pushing at each other like little kids as Quackity shrieks in delight and George yells.

“Is he always like this?” Sapnap asks, already knowing the most likely answer.

Karl giggles into Sapnap’s shoulder. “I don’t know, is George always like this?”

Something tugs at Sapnap’s heart. “Not recently. I’m glad he’s found it again.”

Karl hums in understanding, and his next words are quiet, just for Sapnap. “Yeah. Me too.”

The days slip by as the rain falls ever on, with only the occasional lessening of the lightning and thunder. Sapnap watches the rain continue to fall, watches their supplies get lower and lower, worrying his lip with his teeth. He stops leaving the extra portion and hates himself for it.

The worst part is, being trapped in a cave with Karl and Quackity means he’s actually starting to admit that he *likes* them. He likes that Quackity is able to take George to task, bickering like they’ve known each other for years and exploring the cave as deep back as it goes once Sapnap confirms it’s safe and empty. He likes that Karl’s voice reading another one of his legends can send them all off to sleep. He likes knowing how to make them both laugh, or knowing what to say to them to get George to laugh. He likes that they seem to like talking to him, too, that Karl has started to throw himself into Sapnap’s arms to get his attention and that Quackity is growing ever so casually comfortable enough to sit next to him at the fire or nudge him when he thinks Sapnap is drifting off. He gives sword lessons to Quackity during the day and tries to teach Karl bits and pieces of useful demonic.

He likes all of this, and he hates himself for it. It isn’t right to feel comfortable with strangers he met barely a week ago when there is such a huge hole in the rest of his life. It isn’t right to feel any sort of happy when so much is wrong. He keeps turning to say something to someone who isn’t there, keeps leaving out an extra waterskin because if he can’t spare food, he’ll still give whatever he can. He still keeps Nightmare polished and ready for its true owner. He keeps tucking the little moments he has with their new traveling companions into the back of his mind so he can talk about them later with someone who won’t ever hear him.

Maybe this was to be Sapnap’s new happy? A gulf of pain cracking the good feelings right down

the middle? He'd be okay with that, if it wasn't for the gnawing in his gut that could be either hunger or guilt or grief.

"No matter the weather, we need to move soon," He says to Karl, five nights in, when Quackity and George are sleeping. "We'll run out of supplies tomorrow. We're already hungry from stretching the food we did have for so long. We'd be alright for another couple of days, we've got plenty of water, but I don't want to try to climb down this mountain while malnourished and unsteady. George can be clumsy enough on his own."

Even without the food situation, George has been getting antsy. Sapnap is worried that if they don't leave soon, George will do more than stare wistfully into the rain when he thinks Sapnap isn't looking.

"Sapnap, I don't know much about demon heritage," Karl says carefully, "And if you don't want to discuss it, that's fine, but if the weather hasn't cleared up, it's not George's clumsiness that I'm going to be worried about."

Sapnap tenses. "I'll be fine. Nothing I haven't dealt with before. No need to worry about me."

Karl hesitates, then places a gentle hand on top of Sapnap's. In the last few days, Sapnap has become very aware of exactly how touchy-feely Karl is, but he's still surprised every time that same energy is directed towards him. Karl's palms are rougher than one might expect from a librarian and Sapnap can feel every curve and callous, the pulse beating under the skin, "I'd do that, anyway," he says, soft, and Sapnap allows himself a single moment before he pulls his hand away.

"I'll be fine, Karl. A little fall of rain isn't going to kill me," He says, standing up and stretching in the limited space of the cave opening they sit in, "Go to sleep. I'll take the first watch, and I'll wake George up in a bit. You okay doing the last shift?"

Karl nods, settling himself in beside the others. Sapnap tells himself he doesn't envy the way that Karl effortlessly slips his arms around Quackity, how Quackity is sleepy enough to let him, the way the cloak envelopes them, the way it may be big enough for one more.

He watches the rain fall past the entrance to the cave, and he hopes.

At least this time, George leaves a note.

I know where to get us food. Don't follow me - I'll be back soon. I promise.

Sapnap crumples the note in his palm as he paces the cave, the other two watching him anxiously.

"That motherfucker," He says, turning on his heel, "I should have known he would do this again! That fucking - fuck!" He lets a fist fly towards the wall, hard enough to bruise even if the storm outside covers up any sound from impact.

Despite being on the other side of the cave to him, Sapnap sees Quackity flinch at the motion. His fingers twitch, as if for a cigarette, but his tobacco ran out the day before; Sapnap had given him some of George's migraine herbs to help stave off the withdrawal, but he's been jumpy no matter what. It curdles something in his stomach, even when there's nothing in there to spoil.

"I'm going after him," Sapnap decides, sliding Nightmare into place at his side, and grabbing his cloak. Karl immediately protests.

"You can't, you'll just get lost in the storm - Sapnap!" Karl grabs his arm, pulls him away from the edge of the cave, "He said he'll be back. You have to trust him."

Sapnap pulls his arm away, roughly, "Don't tell me what I have to do. I *have* to protect George, and if a storm isn't going to get in my way, then you sure as hell aren't going to."

"He's taken his bow," Quackity points out, "He's a decent shot, and he's not fucking stupid, Sapnap. I know he trips and he doesn't always have the best plans and he whines with the cold, but he's not stupid. If he says he's gone to get food, then that's what he's probably gone to do. Why else would he go out in this, huh?"

"*This*," Sapnap says, waving his hands towards the storm, the rain that's still coming down in fat droplets that make walking almost like swimming, "Is exactly why I have to go after him, I can't let him go out in this alone!"

"Sapnap -" Karl starts again, but Sapnap slips out of his grasping hands and walks into the storm without another word.

It's like diving into a freezing lake. He's drenched through in seconds, cold and wet sinking deep into his bones. There's a faint hiss that grows steadily louder as his body temperature tries to accommodate the sudden shift, but even half-demon blood can't keep up with the driving wind and pounding rain. Soon enough, he's as loud as a soon-to-pop creeper. It's so thick he can barely see, trying to squint through the rain to find a trail that tells him where on earth George might have got too; if he left any tracks or, the thought popping into his head and leading his heart to sink like a stone, if he just wandered off the edge. They've been in the cave so long, he can barely remember if the edge was two steps away or a meter. Is the wind shaking him or is that just his knees bracing against the storm? Is his vision blurry because he's so cold, or because the rain keeps getting in his eyes? He vaguely remembers warm, rainy days with his dad, dancing in puddles as Bad chided him against getting too wet, too cold. Rain, especially the chilled kind, affects demonborn hybrids more than any other, except perhaps enderborns. They weren't built to withstand the cold and the damp like this, not when the weather was *this* severe. His fire will go out, like what almost happened when he was young. His ears are ringing, but all he can hear is thunder and the splattering of rain against his hood; anything else is lost to the storm.

George needs him. Dream trusted him with that. A little bit of rain isn't going to stop him from doing his duty.

Sapnap takes a step, and his vision tilts. There is a dizzying second where he blinks and he can see the rocks, hundreds of feet below, clear and bright, rushing up to meet him, before a hand grabs his arm, and a different hand grabs the back of his cloak, and he's being pulled back - back - back - back into the dark of the cave.

His ears are still ringing, and he can barely make out the words being thrown around over his head. Sapnap is leaning heavily on those hands to keep him upright, blinking to try and keep his vision from blurring more - he's cold, he's *so cold*, and he's shivering with no pause in sight.

"Fuck, Quackity, get a fire going, he's gonna need it -"

"We need to get that cloak off him, it'll only make him colder, shit, shit, *shit* -"

Sapnap feels like he should say something, but as he feels the cloak peel off his back, his teeth are chattering too hard for any words to form. He tries anyway.

"G-George -"

“You’re gonna be no use to George like this,” Karl says gently, “Come on, sit down, it’s okay, we’ve got you.”

If it wasn’t for Karl’s arms hooked under his shoulders, he would have already sunk to the ground. His legs feel completely numb and he doesn’t think he can stand on his own right now. He’s directed to sit down next to the slowly growing fire, and someone, Quackity he thinks, puts a warm cloak around his shoulders. It’s bright and painful to look at. Karl’s.

“Didn’t I say?” Karl says, “This isn’t just a summer storm you can power through, it’s a mountain storm! It was always gonna hit you harder because of your heritage. Now, can we hug you?”

“W-what?” Sapnap asks, through chattering teeth.

“Body heat or skin-to-skin contact is best to get people warm again,” Karl explains, withdrawing his arm from around Sapnap’s shoulders, and part of him longs for the contact to return again, “But I want to know if it’s okay with you first.”

“Y-you’ve never,” His tongue is thick and heavy with the cold, and he struggles to let out the words, “You’ve n-never asked b-before.”

“Because you could probably throw us over a cliff if you didn’t want to,” Quackity says, going for a joking tone, and Karl interrupts.

“What Quackity means is that you’re more than capable of asserting yourself if you didn’t like what we were doing, but right now, you don’t seem up to much,” Karl glances down at Sapnap’s shaking legs and trembling hands. Sapnap doesn’t pull away when Karl takes his hands into his own, running a thumb over the back of them. Behind them, Quackity shifts awkwardly from foot to foot, their spare blankets in his hands, “So I’m asking instead.”

“I need to...” Sapnap starts, “*George* -”

“The sooner you warm up, the sooner you can go out looking for him, if that’s what you really want. But we’ll be coming with you, like it or not. The job is to get to the Badlands in one piece, and that includes you, too.”

“George wouldn’t want you to get yourself hurt, man, not for him,” Quackity says, uncharacteristically quiet.

“You don’t understand,” Sapnap says, trembling involuntarily, “I have to protect him. It’s more than just a job. He’s more than just my friend.”

Karl’s eyes widen, “You mean, you and him -”

“No, not like *that*, Prime, *no*,” His chest feels funny, tight, his ribs a cage around his lungs only ever getting tighter, “He’s... He’s my *duty*. He’s, fuck, he’s all I’ve got left, I can’t lose him, I *can’t*, Karl, I can’t fucking lose him, too.”

And he can feel it now, spreading from his stomach to his chest to his limbs, the heat that the rain knocked out of him in one blow, all of it is bubbling up like hot magma and he barely even notices when Karl’s hands startle away with a hissed exclamation of pain.

He can’t breathe, he can’t even think, his whole body is shivering but he feels like he’s burning at the same time, needlepoints over his skin; the smoke from the fire is making his eyes water but the tears are steaming on impact with his skin so his whole world is a mix of grey smoke and white steam, the world is swirling and *George isn’t there*. He’s lost his dad and his father, his home, his

best friends, and it feels like an anvil on his ribs, thorns snaking through his heart, that horrifying realization that if he loses George he loses everything.

What is he without George? What does he have left? Just a half-demon kid with a glowing sword that doesn't want him and a mission he's failed.

There are hands on his face, his arms, Karl saying, "Q, don't, you'll just hurt yourself!" but there's another, quieter voice, breaking through the panic like cool water on a hot day, ice to a burn.

"Sapnap, you need to breathe, okay? In for seven, out for eleven, alright, in time with me. You can feel my hands, they're real, you're real, I'm real and you're gonna be fine, man, you just gotta breathe."

"Alone," Sapnap chokes out, "He's gone, he's left me, they're both gone and I can't, I can't do this on my own, I'm alone -"

"You're not alone," Karl says, softly, "You're not alone, Sapnap. We're not going anywhere," then, to Quackity, hissing, "You're going to burn yourself, let go!"

"Let me help!" Quackity snaps and, at Sapnap's hitch of breath, lets his voice go soft again, like he's talking to a frightened animal, "Sapnap, we're here, man, okay? We're here. We're not gonna leave you. Breathe with me. Breathe. Count to seven with me"

He takes a deep exaggerated inhale, holds it, waiting for Sapnap, and normally Sapnap would shoot back that he isn't a child and doesn't need to be babied, but this isn't normal. His chest is collapsing in on itself like a black hole and so Sapnap forces air into his lungs to the count of seven and breathes out as Quackity does, slow and controlled, hiccuping where Quackity is steady. Karl puts his arm back around Sapnap's shoulders. He focuses on the feel of his calloused hands on his back, on the cool palms on his cheeks. A moment later, there is a warm forehead pressed to his, and a thumb spins circles over his shoulder blades.

The rain pours on and on outside, and Sapnap *breathes*. He gasps for air like he's been drowning, desperate to fill his chest, which aches like he's broken all his ribs at once. His throat hurts like it's been crushed. His eyes sting with smoke and steam. He's shaking so hard he keeps nipping his tongue when he tries to talk and all he tastes is blood and misery.

"There you go," Quackity says, when Sapnap is still shaky but no longer skipping breaths, when his lungs open up to the musty cave air, "It's okay, Sap. It's alright."

Somehow, it's the nickname that has tears pricking at his eyes, and he has to swallow past the lump in his throat.

"Sorry," He says, rough and haggard, finally opening his eyes to see Quackity kneeling in front of him, "Sorry, I -"

"Don't apologize," Karl says sternly, and Quackity nods, "You're good, man, seriously."

Quackity drops his hands, and Sapnap feels a stab of horror as he sees his red palms, burnt by Sapnap's skin.

"Quackity -"

"I said it's all good, okay?" Quackity replies, and Sapnap can't help but notice that there's a matching red burn in the center of his forehead, and his stomach sinks even more, "I'll cool them off with the rain while I'm keeping an eye out for that son of a bitch. Just wait 'til I get my new red

mitts on him.”

“He’ll be back,” Karl murmurs as Quackity moves towards the cave entrance as if he’s the one that grew up with George and not Sapnap, “He said he would. He promised.”

Sapnap wants nothing more than to run out of this cave and drag George back in from wherever he’s hidden himself; wants nothing more than to run and run and run until he’s found his best friend and yelled at him so he knows how badly Sapnap was worried.

But Karl’s arms are warm, the fire’s heat seeping into his rain-soaked bones. His legs feel like moss, that they’ll snap like sticks if he stands.

“Promises,” He says, voice hoarse, “aren’t always kept, Karl.”

“Trust him,” Karl replies, “You know him, Sapnap. He won’t have left you.”

Karl is wrong but Sapnap doesn’t trust himself to answer that. Instead, he concentrates on making sure he doesn’t burn Karl anymore than he already has. He tucks his trust for George close to his chest, an ever-dimming but still-warm flame while his body slowly thaws.

It’s all he has. He cannot let it flicker out. Karl’s steady heartbeat and the image of Quackity, hands held out and up facing the steady rain outside as he watches for George keep him company.

“I miss him,” He says, barely words, but Karl hears him anyway, “I miss him so much.”

“He’ll be back,” Karl repeats, but Sapnap’s not talking about George.

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

as always, thank you for your lovely comments!! I hope you enjoy the cameos in this chapter :D

tw for this chapter // panic attacks, violence, injuries, disassociation and flashbacks, implied abuse

George returns the next morning, soaking wet, bearing the expression of a particularly unamused drowned cat, and with enough food to make up for the skipped meals as well as the journey down the mountain, in the form of a doe he's seemingly carried from wherever he found it on his back. Sapnap yells at him for nearly twenty minutes while Quackity watches with an apple balanced in his fingers and a slight smile on his face, before Sapnap runs out of steam and pulls George into a hug that lasts another ten minutes.

It's still raining and Sapnap has been up all night, same as Karl and Quackity.

"I'm going to sleep." He says stiffly when he's done hugging George. "Don't wake me up. Don't talk to me. Don't fucking leave."

"Okay, Sap." George says quietly, thoroughly chastised for now.

Sapnap goes to his bed and shoves it deep into the cave, away from the fire and the others, where he can press his back to the wall and feel contained and safe. He lays down, pulls his cloak over his head, hides his face in his arms. He's so tired. He feels wrung out. Karl offered to butch the beast, so Sapnap will leave it all to them.

When he hears footsteps only a few minutes later, he practically growls. "Go away."

"Okay." Quackity says quietly, "I will in just a sec. I wanted to bring you this, though."

Sapnap peeks out of his make-shift blanket, brows furrowed. Quackity, of any of them, is allowed the most leeway right now. Sapnap hasn't forgotten the bright red of his hands and forehead, the way his voice had broken through the panic.

He's holding Karl's cloak.

"That thing is going to give me a seizure." Sapnap mumbles and pretends that he doesn't already ache for it to be laid over him.

"Not if you don't look at it, idiot." Quackity snorts and snaps it out so it flutters gently over him. The weight is sort of familiar from last night, when he'd worn this cloak for hours until he'd calmed down enough to be back to his normal temperature. It smells like Karl, but it smells like Quackity, too. Sapnap pretends that isn't comforting.

He lets Quackity sit at the edge of the bed and smooth the cloak out for a few seconds, slowing his breathing again. The cave wall is firm against his back. He doesn't trust Quackity much, but he trusts him enough to let him sit close while he calms down.

Quackity's red palms have earned him that.

"I know you're mad." Quackity finally speaks up, "And I'm not saying you shouldn't be. It was fucked up for him to leave, especially when you two are obviously...intense, or whatever."

Sapnap doesn't answer.

"But..." Quackity continues, softer, "He loves you, too. What you'd do for him, he'd do for you. Just know that you're really lucky, okay? To have that. Someone who loves you so much. Rest up, Sap."

He probably means to pat Sapnap's shoulder but he's hidden under the cloak and Quackity's hand falls onto his head instead. It's comforting and familiar, if the wrong person doing it, and it forces tears to his eyes again. His temperature isn't high enough to steam these off so they slip free, just three, and stain the pillow under his head.

Quackity leaves. Sapnap doesn't sleep for a long time but, eventually, he does.

The rain breaks two days later. George tries to talk to Sapnap a few times, but Sapnap ignores him for the first day after he returns. He doesn't eat until George literally begs, and then he only does it because George looks close to crying and Karl threatens to force it down his throat if he doesn't. He nibbles on some meat, eventually consuming the whole ration and then half of another one. He notices that they've been leaving a fifth ration out - only half of one, but there nonetheless, even though he hadn't asked. The sight of it threatens to empty his stomach, but he bites down the nausea and watches as it remains uneaten.

The next day, he breaks his silence with a "take the watch, George." He doesn't sleep the whole watch, just keeps his eyes on the wall and listens for the sounds of George leaving. They don't come. George just sharpens his arrows and makes a few more during his watch and wakes Quackity when his time is done.

George is careful with him when they eat breakfast. Hands him his ration silently, a gleaming apple and a thick cut of what might be mutton.

"Thank you." Sapnap says roughly and it's like the sun comes out in the cave, with how bright George smiles. There are dark bruises under his eyes and they match Sapnap's.

"No problem." George says and sits carefully a foot away. When Sapnap shifts slightly closer, George takes the invitation and nearly collapses into his side, shoving his face into Sapnap's shoulder and looping an arm across his back. "Sleep okay?"

"Yep." Sapnap nods once. "Eat."

George eats so fast he chokes a couple times, doesn't slow down until Sapnap relaxes into his arm and starts eating, too. Karl and Quackity watch them from across the ever-burning fire, slowly being fed by the emergency wood George has been collecting in the enderchest for weeks now. That's starting to run low, too, but Sapnap doesn't dare to mention it.

Only hours later, while Sapnap is doing his sword exercises in his boxers while George scrubs his pants and shirt clean for him and Karl and Quackity are both intently staring out into the rain and refusing to turn around when George tries to talk to them, there is a break in the clouds that has Quackity screeching.

"Sun!!" He screams, jumping up so quick Karl falls over, "Sun! I see the sun!"

“Where!?” George disregards Sapnap’s clothes, standing quickly and running to the mouth of the cave. Sapnap sets Nightmare down, following at a slower pace, still panting from the exercises. All three of them crowd but Karl and Quackity part like crops to a scythe when he comes through, giving him plenty of room to look.

Quackity was right. There, maybe an hour out if the wind stays true, is a break in the clouds. A little farther than that, it seems as if the storm clouds truly end.

“Oh.” Sapnap lets himself smile, “It’s almost over.”

“Yep.” Karl says loudly, “So you should finish up your sword stuff and get some clothes on, hotstuff! Faster we are all fully clothed, faster we can leave!”

“Oh, sorry.” Sapnap glances down at himself, mostly bare except for his boxers and socks, “Does it make you guys uncomfortable? I’m used to it just being us, I didn’t think.”

“No, no, it doesn’t bother me.” Quackity says firmly, voice noticeably blank, “It’s fine. You’re fine. I mean, you look good. I mean, you’re good. You’re fine. You’re good, Sapnap.”

“Mhm.” Karl agrees, strangely pitched.

“Okay.” Sapnap says and turns around to go back to Nightmare.

“Smooth, guys.” George says in the sort of voice he saved for when Dream fell off a tall place in front of people.

“Shut the fuck up and finish scrubbing those clothes, Georgie.” Quackity says back brightly and whatever look accompanies the tone sends George hurrying to do as told.

Sapnap rolls his eyes and picks up Nightmare. He’ll never understand those three idiots.

When the rain finally breaks, Sapnap is dressed and camp is broken. All that remains of their week-long stay is a fire pit with ash and the markings Karl made during their third night when he was attempting to carve demonic words into the wall as Sapnap taught him.

“Down we go?” Karl asks. The answer should be *no*, it should be *we’ll wait for things to dry a little*.

“Yes.” Sapnap says and then pushes through them to stand outside. When the sun kisses his skin, he feels his entire body go lax. It feels like a caress from a gentle hand, like a sip of water when you’re dying of thirst, like the first touch of warmth after winter. He can already feel his insides warming up, his energy coming back. He just needs to stand in the sunlight and *absorb* for a while.

But he can do that later. For now, they need to make their way to town. Get more supplies, because they won’t have many chances after this. From this town, they start their journey west toward the Crimson Forest and will want to avoid as many towns as possible in order to avoid suspicion. The food George brought was enough to last them their time in the cave and a little beyond but they’ll need to stock up as much as they can before they truly go off-grid.

The rest of the journey is slow, but in good humor. They’re all just glad to be back in the sun. Quackity has had plenty of time to regain his energy and Sapnap is still just a little shaky from his rain adventures so they all stick close together and go slow on the descent.

When they hit level land again, George sighs in relief so loud enough that it makes Karl laugh.

“Come on, guys.” He rubs his hands together, “We’re going to get to town, we’re going to get as much shit as we can, we’re going to sleep in a real inn tonight and eat a real meal, and then we’re going to test our fate at the Crimson Forest. Sounds like a plan?”

“We’re going to go in, buy our shit, and leave, Karl.” Sapnap says patiently and doesn’t budge when all three of them whine at him like particularly spoiled children. Only one of them has that as an excuse though, as far as Sapnap knows, so he doesn’t know how Karl and Quackity justify the behavior.

When the town comes into view, though, Sapnap can admit that even he is tempted. They’d sent Bad a message before entering the mountains, and he knows that if he goes to the courthouse, there will be a parcel waiting with money and a letter updating them on what’s happening in the capital. There will be a second, secret letter updating Sapnap on the search for Dream, too, which he won’t share with George until he has news, good or bad. He doesn’t want to raise his hopes only to have to crush them. He knows that whatever emptiness he’s feeling with Dream’s absence at his side, it must be the same, or worse, for George. He still has a best friend at his side, at least. George is missing a partner in more ways than one, something Sapnap’s presence cannot even attempt to replace.

The town is beautiful for its dry, busy atmosphere.

“We made it.” Quackity says with feeling.

“We sure the fuck did.” Karl exclaims loud enough for people to look at him, and marches in with all the pomp of someone much more important than a librarian. Sapnap can’t help but smile and, exchanging glances with his friends, follow him.

Karl brings attention to himself just by breathing. His cloak is brightly colored and gaudily patterned and people stop to stare at it - it looks expensive, for as ugly as it is, because no common person could afford all those colors and intricate pieces stitched together. Sapnap knows for a fact that it’s made with an expert’s hand, and one could tell just by looking at it, so people look. On top of that, Karl and Quackity are just - loud. He and George, as hyped up as they can get, generally stay pretty mellow, but Karl and Quackity bounce from stall to stall, examining and bartering as they see fit. Quackity is drawn to the little games and flower sellers, exchanging small gold pieces for chance games before he’s dragged away by Karl to look at some knickknack stall.

“It’s like shopping with children.” George sighs, watching Karl point emphatically at some book on a shelf behind a vendor. George has pulled a mask up over his nose to cover his face and Sapnap’s hidden both Nightmare and George’s diamond sword in sheathes on his back, covered by his nondescript cloak. Sapnap hopes that adding two new people, even as loud and conspicuous as they are, will throw anyone off their trail that has managed to keep up with them this far. He doesn’t think anyone would have expected them to double back but this town is the most dangerous spot on their new trail. He wants to get in and out as quickly as possible.

Still, an extra half hour letting the two of them run some energy out can’t be that big a deal, right?

“Come on,” he nudges George, “We’ll grab what we need while they wander. We need to stop by the courthouse to see if Bad left us anything.”

They track the courthouse down easy enough, both Karl and Quackity tagging along when George lets them know what he and Sapnap would be doing despite their excitement to roam. As expected, there is a small package waiting for Sapnap under the alias Bad told him to use in his last letter.

“What did he give us?” George peers over his shoulder curiously once they’ve left the courthouse

and are standing in a little alley a few houses down, “Anything interesting?”

Sapnap rolls his eyes and holds out the money, “Yes, he’s refreshed the royal coffers, your highness.”

“Ew, don’t say it like that.” George snatches the satchel and empties it into his purse, which he keeps secured under his shirt, “I meant, did he send anything *cool*.”

Sapnap shoves the note about the current status of the capital into George’s hands, making sure he pockets the much smaller slip of paper as George scans the letter for anything particularly interesting.

“Come on,” Sapnap nudges his arm, “We need to actually get some supplies. So we don’t end up starving to death in a cave again.”

They spend the next twenty minutes collecting supplies. Sapnap and Quackity argue over food - Sapnap wants to be conservative, he can hunt as they travel if needed, but Quackity wants to over-order with the argument that they won’t need much money for a while since they won’t be stopping anytime soon. Karl pooled what little coin he and Quackity had come to them with in George’s purse alongside their allowance after they’d splurged pre-courthouse trip and Sapnap figures it isn’t an awful idea to over-buy so Quackity wins the argument and they spend the bulk of their freshly received coin on food. Dried meat, a few bundles of apples, toughhardtack for emergencies, and Karl whinges a small bottle of wine out of Sapnap, too. Sapnap takes note of the way that Quackity quietly bargains for a pack of tobacco, slips it into his pocket like he’s afraid of them seeing. Sapnap isn’t sure why; the smoke is unpleasant, but far more unpleasant was the jitters that accompanied withdrawal, the headaches that had Quackity laid out on the floor of the cave as his supply slowly dwindled.

Quackity sees him looking, and guilt flashes in his eyes. Sapnap feels the sudden and irrevocable urge to comfort him.

“It’s okay, man, we all have our vices. Especially that one,” he gestures to George, currently arguing with Karl about the merits of buying easily meltable chocolate that is absolutely not suited for an off-trail trip. For a start, it has got to have enough sugar in it to kill a horse, and Sapnap does not look forward to having to fight off that particular sugar crash.

Quackity isn’t looking at their bickering friends, though. He’s staring at Sapnap, inscrutable, but when he catches him looking, he flashes a grin.

“Are you gonna stop them, or should I?” He asks, and Sapnap just shakes his head and watches as George acquires a large bag of the stuff. He hands it off to Sapnap with a pleading look. Far too used to it at this point, he only opens up the enderchest with a small sigh. Karl carries another bag of rations, to be packed away more neatly once they’re out of town and Sapnap feels safe reorganizing.

“That should be it.” Sapnap finishes packing their enderchest and then swings it back on his shoulders. The weight of it is familiar after these months, where it had once been a constant pain. His body is adjusting to the new lifestyle he leads; he’s stronger, his muscles more useful than simply good to look at.

He feels - content, healthy. The sunshine has been beating down on him for close to two hours now and his skin is practically glowing after days locked away. They have food, and a little money still left over. George looks happy, so the news from the capital can’t be any worse than usual. Quackity has been casually brushing against him the entire time they’ve been in town and Karl had

hooked their hands together to drag him to some stall to beg for sweets until Sapnap had given in and bought some for all of them. Sapnap doesn't know if he'll ever feel *happy* again, but he feels good. Alive.

"So now we can find an inn, right, guys?" Karl is walking backward, one hand tangled with Quackity's, and Quackity is casually nudging him with gentle tugs so he avoids things in his way.

"No." Sapnap says pointedly, "Now, we leave. We aren't gonna push our luck. Let's go."

"Come on, Sapnap," George complains, tugging at his sleeve, "We're staying. Okay? Just for the night. I miss real beds. I'm sick of the cots."

"No." Sapnap repeats, "We're leaving."

"I hate this family." Karl grumbles, "Our dad's such a stickler."

"I didn't know we were introducing that kink so soon," Quackity says and then laughs so hard he has to bend over when Karl trips on his own feet and falls backward onto the ground, "Oh, gods, your face! Karl, your fuckin' face, man, your fuckin' face!"

"Shut *your* face up," Karl flounders from the ground, now dusty and flustered, "I wasn't expecting that, that's all! Bringing our bedroom life out into the open like that, what kind of boy do you think I am?"

"An annoying one." Sapnap sighs, offering a hand. Karl wraps his fingers around Sapnap's and Sapnap pulls him up easily, patting him down to get rid of the dirt as best he can, "Fuck's sake, you two."

"What?" Quackity presses a hand to his chest, "It wasn't *me*. Karl started it."

"Karl started it," Karl simpers back in a high voice, "That's what you sound like."

"No, it isn't." Quackity reaches out quickly and shoves him, nearly knocking him back over, "It isn't what I sound like."

"It is!" Karl darts forward to shove him back and Quackity ducks behind Sapnap, hands on his shoulders.

"It isn't! It isn't!"

"It is!" Karl tries to get around Sapnap to get to Quackity but Quackity uses Sapnap as a shield, his grip forcing Sapnap to move so he stays between them. Sapnap just sighs and lets them do as they want, limply standing in place while the two of them chase each other around, moving when Quackity pulls and stopping when Karl grabs him to hold him still.

"You can't use Sapnap like that, Big Q, that's so freakin' unfair, take your punishment!"

"Hell no!"

George watches all three of them, arms crossed, smiling. It's - it's a smile Sapnap hasn't seen in such a long time. Even before the coup, before they ran, back before George started to get drawn closer and closer to his parents and his eventual duty. It was the sort of look he got when he was watching Sapnap and Dream bicker when he'd just spent ten minutes slowly egging them into an ever-escalating argument that would often end in Dream just putting Sapnap in a headlock and scrubbing at his hair until Sapnap called 'uncle' or purposefully scalded him into letting go.

It makes Sapnap's heart ache, bittersweet.

"You're being idiots." George says, smile growing wider. And then his face pinches, a small motion that has Sapnap frowning and reaching for his pack with the herbs that George uses to mitigate his migraines when they get too bad for him to even see.

"George," he starts, "Are you -?"

"KARL JACOBS!"

The shout splits the crowd in two, opening up a gap between their merry little band and some random trio. Sapnap sees the glee slide off Karl's face, sees it frozen on a vaguely panicked expression.

It's the first time Sapnap's seen him look anything more than slightly concerned about something. Whatever this is, it's spooked him.

"What?" Karl looks around like he's confused, "*What?* What are they doing here?"

"Who?" Quackity looks over Sapnap's shoulders, hands still holding his arms, "Who are they?"

"Not friends." Karl says quickly, "We should all go. Quackity." Karl looks at Quackity, something in his suddenly serious eyes flashing, and whatever it is, it kickstarts Quackity, too, who starts to pull at Sapnap in the opposite direction than they had been going.

"You got it, bookmeister, let's get out of here."

"Uh," George starts, expression clearing as he fast-walks alongside them. Quackity hasn't dropped his grip on Sapnap's wrist and Karl is staring ahead of them like if he just pretends they aren't being followed, they won't be. "Guys? They're following us."

"Karl *motherfucking* Jacobs, you won't get away again!"

"Go faster," Karl says and then takes off. Sapnap, not knowing what exactly he's running from, speeds up to match. He twists his grip on Quackity so it reverses, him holding Quackity instead of the other way around, and trusts that George can handle the sudden boost in speed.

They run. Karl leads them through a few twists, down a couple alleys, past the courthouse, through another market area. The town is small, but big enough to lose a group of strangers in - Sapnap hopes so, at least.

"G-go left," Quackity pants suddenly, his voice breaking through, "Next left!"

"What's left?" George asks, but Karl doesn't hesitate to hang the next left and Sapnap has no choice but to follow him. He can feel Quackity starting to lag, hear his rough breathing.

'Left' leads to a small courtyard, a larger house they'd passed by maybe an hour ago sitting seemingly empty.

"We can't keep running," Quackity explains as they all come to a stop, using Sapnap as a support as he tries to catch his breath, "We can set up here, be prepared when they catch up."

Karl looks around seriously, "Yeah. You three should go. I'll catch up after, okay?"

"No way!" George cuts in immediately, "There are three of them!"

“We outnumber them right now.” Sapnap agrees, “We’ll take them out quick.”

“Oh, geez,” Karl looks down the alley they’d just come from, “This is, like, worrisome, dude. How did they find me? What are they doing here?”

“Who are they again?” Quackity clears his throat, stepping away from Sapnap suddenly without looking at him, “Old friends?”

“You could say that.” Karl pulls a face, “Co-workers, more like. We didn’t part on good terms.”

“Are they dangerous?” Sapnap pulls Nightmare from his back, tosses the diamond sword to Quackity, who catches it with only a slight fumble.

“Yes.” Karl nods, hands disappearing under his cloak, likely to touch his daggers, “A little bit. They’re missing some people, so we may not be as advantageously numbered as you think.”

“We’ll handle it.” George pulls his bow, “I’m going to go up.” He points at the house, where a small patio faces the courtyard. “Everyone be careful, yeah?”

“This is gonna suck.” Karl rubs his face, “I hate when ex’s catch up.”

“Ex’s!?” Quackity snaps a glare at him, “Karl.”

“Only two of them!”

“*Karl!*”

“Listen -”

“They’re coming.” Sapnap steps between them, slightly in front of Karl, who has yet to draw a weapon, and points Nightmare toward the sound of approaching boots and clanging armor.

Within seconds, the three strangers spill out of the alley, each in expensive-looking armor and wielding diamond swords of their own.

“K-Karl...Jacobs...” the one in front says, panting, “You won’t...escape justice...this time!”

“Oh, hi, Billiam. Fancy seeing you here.” Karl slowly peeks from behind Sapnap. He’s *taller* than Sapnap, but he’s burrowed himself into a smaller stature, hiding behind Sapnap’s bulk. “Liaria. Butler. You’re missing a few, I think.”

“Yes.” Billiam says scathingly, drawing himself up to his full, part-piglin height, “We’re missing three, in fact. Sebastian and James *and* Oliver. You might recall them since you’re the one that abandoned them to their fate!”

“You make it sound so dire.” Karl clears his throat awkwardly, “It wasn’t that serious when I left.”

“You left,” Billiam snarls, low and dangerous, “And everything was *ruined*. We’ve been looking for you for a long time, Karl, for our revenge.”

“Well, that’s a bit stupid,” Karl points out, “You could have just come to the library. Open every other day, except the days starting with an S and a T. Then it’s only open afternoons, or mornings if I’m out -”

“Enough.” A woman steps forward, presumably Liaria, and brandishes her sword, before Karl can patter on about his absurd opening hours, or Quackity can say something regarding the group’s

collective literacy ability, “You! Do you know what I promised I’d do if I ever laid my eyes on you again, you filthy, common, little hireling!?”

“*Hireling?*” Karl repeats back with confusion. “I -”

“I swore that I’d kill you.” Liaria interrupts. Her voice is lilting, slightly accented, and cuts through the air like a knife, “And avenge my friends.”

“Okay, well, those are some strong feelings, there. I can tell you mean them.” Karl raises his hands out of his cloak, placating, “Can’t we talk this out? Billiam, my good man, you *love* talking!”

“Don’t speak.” Billiam motions, “Butler. Take his tongue.”

The third stranger, who has been silent until now, steps forward. He’s the least armored and the only one Sapnap has spotted as a true threat. The other two, they hold their swords well, but the way they talk, their loudness, the way they hold their shoulders - it all points to aristocracy. The sort of training that every rich person gets, competent but not particularly dangerous to someone who knows what they’re doing. This man, though. Butler. Sapnap watches him.

His instincts are proven right. Butler is fast. In only a moment, he’s halfway across the courtyard and his sword is swinging down toward Karl.

“You all *hated* Oliver!” Karl screeches just as Sapnap gets Nightmare between him and the diamond sword. Their blades clash with a loud, ear-ringing shriek of netherite on gem. Sapnap feels the force of it in his arms but he pushes through, shoves forward, and sends Butler flailing back with a grunt of effort.

“What’s this?” Billiam sneers, “A new group for our conman condottiere to fool?”

“Come on,” Karl raises a hand to his chest, “A conman? A *condottiere*? You’re giving me too much credit.”

“Right.” Liaria grits out, “We are. What Billiam means to call you is a coward. You’re a *coward*, Jacobs.”

“Not nice.” Karl frowns, “I wasn’t *scared* of anything! I just felt it best if we ended our partnership. Things were getting a little intense, you know, between me and James, he was kinda needy, if you know what I mean. And Sebastian, well, he was sort of an asshole. Sorry about Oliver, though, I didn’t think he’d stick around after I left, honest!”

“You ended our partnership but kept our money! You yellow-bellied, sorry excuse for a hired hand!” Billiam shouts and Sapnap feels his spine chill.

“You’re a *mercenary!*?” Sapnap grits out, tossing a glare over his shoulder, “What the *fuck*, Karl!?”

“What do you *mean*, am I a *mercenary!*?” Karl turns to him, mouth gaping, “Sapnap, you *hired* me!?”

“I hired you as a *guide!*”

“I *said* I have a side gig!”

“Not as a fuckin’ *mercenary!*”

“Gee, sorry, should I have pulled out my résumé!?”

George looses an arrow between the two of them and it pings off Liaria’s sword as she raises it in an attempt to surge them.

“Pay attention, *both* of you!” he orders from on high, his voice hard, “Now actually isn’t the time to bicker like children, if you hadn’t noticed!”

“I thought it was kinda hot.” Quackity admits, but he sounds tense. The louder and angrier that the group gets, Sapnap notices from the corner of his eye, the more motionless Quackity becomes.

Sapnap snaps his mouth shut, just grumbling in annoyance. He’d have liked to *know*, at least, that Karl was a fucking merc. Karl didn’t *look* like a merc. He sure the fuck didn’t act like one, either.

“Butler, why are you hesitating?” Billiam speaks up, “I said I want Karl Jacobs’ *tongue*. Bring it to me.”

For a split second, there is a terrible part of him that wants to use this moment to his advantage. The part of him that was trained by the Badlands and his dad, by the motto of survival above all else that has powered him through the last few months screams at him to grab George and to *run*.

Maybe before the cave, he might have. Maybe before he started to associate the smells of old parchment and woodfire and dry earth with safety and comfort. Maybe then, he would have taken all that he had left and he would have run.

But that still wasn’t true, was it? These last few months might have made him colder, more pragmatic now that he had no one there to truly watch his back, now that George was his responsibility and his alone, but he liked to think he was still, despite it all, Sapnap. And Sapnap, even as the only real home he had ever known had burned around him, even as he raced to the duty that he hoped would never have to come, had still stopped in the middle of the worst day of his life to protect a stranger.

And this wasn’t a stranger. It wasn’t a shadowed figure in the hollowed-out bones of what was once a home. It was Karl, Karl who wrapped his arms around Sapnap’s burning shoulders and made a promise he couldn’t hope to keep.

George would call him dramatic if he said those two had saved his life. But if no one had stopped him, Sapnap knew that the storm would have killed him.

In the end, there is no question. Sapnap doesn’t hesitate. Butler flashes forward again, unnaturally fast, but Sapnap pushes Karl behind him and raises Nightmare, meeting the diamond in another clash of blades.

“Sorry.” He grunts, putting his weight behind holding the man back, “You can’t have his tongue. You’ll have to take an IOU.”

“Once we get out of this, remind me to show you what my tongue can do,” Karl flirts, but it sounds like he isn’t even paying attention, just saying the first stupid thing to pop into his mind. Sapnap still feels his entire face flood with heat.

“*Karl!*”

“What!? I flirt when I panic!”

“Stop panicking.” Sapnap glances behind him, meets Karl’s eyes, “I’m here. You and Quackity

just stay between George and me, okay? Quackity? You with us?"

Quackity blinks. His sword is up but there is a crease at his temple that Sapnap has never seen before on him, and ever so slightly, the sword in his hand trembles. His hands must be bothering him because his grip is wrong. "Huh? Y-yeah, yes, of course. Of course, I'm with you. Right here, right with you, ha." He takes a step back, his sword flagging a little, "It's just, uh, I'm - I'm not actually, okay, so the thing about me and swords, it's just that we're not all that, you know, familiar, all that comfortable, together, not really, but I'm here, I'm good, I -"

"Quackity." Sapnap rears back and plants a foot against Butler's hip, shoving him far enough back that Sapnap can safely retreat, crowd the two of them behind him in the safety between George's straight-and-true arrows and Nightmare. It's the safest place in the entire world, as far as Sapnap knows, even if a new hand wields Nightmare this time around. "I said I'm here. Okay?"

"Oh." Quackity blinks, the panicked haze in his eyes lifting, "Right. Yeah. You're here."

"Just watch our flank." Sapnap turns back to Butler, "Both of you. Don't let them separate you from behind me, okay?"

"Yeah." Quackity agrees, voice quiet, "You're here."

Sapnap feels his chest warm at the trust he hears in his voice.

"Cute." Liaria narrows her eyes at them and takes a number of threatening steps forward, "But there are three talented swordsmen on this side of the conflict and seems to be only one on your side. We'll come out of this on top, you do realize?"

She takes another step, and then an arrow buries itself in her shoulder and she's flung back with a scream.

"Your maths checks out," George says from on high. Sapnap hears the string of George's bow drawing back as he notches another arrow, "But you forgot to factor in that one good archer is better than, like, all of you. Combined. That's me, by the way. I'm the good archer."

"Billiam," Liaria gasps, sitting up slowly, "He *shot* me! That commoner *shot* me!"

"*Commoner!*?" George splutters, "You're *joking*!"

"George, shut the fuck up." Sapnap calls up to him but he can't help the grin that consumes his face. *Commoner*. If only they knew.

"Liaria!" Billiam drops to her side, though he's careful not to let his knees directly touch the ground, "Butler, end this, for pity's *sake*!"

Butler's voice is monotone, empty of the rage of Liaria's or the indignity of Billiam. "I'm going to have to ask you to step aside."

Sapnap stands to attention, eyes moving from his sweep of the current battlefield to his opponent. Butler didn't take the chance to attack while he was distracted, but his face shows no hint of sympathy. He's eerily blank, just a dark stare under a helmet and a diamond sword raised.

"Sorry," Sapnap grins, knows it looks a little feral, "You heard what happens if we get out of this."

"Hell yeah, baby, kick his ass!" Karl calls from behind him.

“So be it.”

When Butler comes at him, he’s somehow faster than he was before. Sapnap barely brings Nightmare up in time to block him, the blade singing and chill under his warm palms.

“George, keep them off us!” He calls and then heaves forward, forcing Butler back. Their swords slide apart and Sapnap spins, swings low at his opponent’s knees. Butler moves to the left and Sapnap takes the opportunity to ram into him with his shoulder, nearly taking him off his feet. Butler retreats, flicking his sword hard. Sapnap sees a predator regrouping and does the same, retreating back to his starting spot. He doesn’t have to look behind him, knows Karl and Quackity are watching him. He can feel them. He can hear George’s bow, too, and his amused chuckle at the frustrated growling coming from Billiam and Liaria.

“Take one wrong step,” George warns, “And one of my arrows goes through your face. I’m missing on purpose, you fucking bafoon.”

“Do you even know who you’re protecting!?” Billiam shrieks, sounding perilously close to someone who’s just been told his preferred armorer is indisposed, “That man is a fraud! A cad! A disloyal, cowardly, treasonous -”

“Oh, for *Prime*’s sake, man!” Karl yells back, finally sounding frustrated, “I *told* you at the *start* of our partnership that I wasn’t interested in anything intense! You guys are the ones that turned up the heat, I just got out of the frying pan!”

“You *abandoned us!*”

“We all have our regrets!” Karl yells back, “That’s not one of mine, but the point stands!”

“Karl.” Sapnap hisses, “Not helpful.”

“You’re distracting him.” Quackity chimes in, his voice tense again.

“No,” Sapnap flicks Nightmare in a familiar trick, its hilt fluttering between his fingers as he loosens his wrist out, never taking his eyes off Butler, who’s pacing and watching him just as intently, “There’s no point arguing with idiots. You’re wasting your breath. Just watch my back, okay?”

“You got it, hotstuff.” Karl says loyally, “No one’s getting behind that insanely built back of yours while we’re here.”

“Prime.” Sapnap shakes off a smile, “You really do flirt when you panic. Calm down, handsome, you’ll make Quackity jealous.”

“Jealous?” Quackity scoffs, but his voice is tight. He’s holding onto the sword with white-knuckled fingers, “I’m having a blast. Flirt away. It’s fine by me.”

“Convincing.” Karl cackles, then shrieks when Butler charges suddenly. Sapnap’s ready, though, and Nightmare never sings as beautifully as it does when it slices through the air. Butler is more prepared for its bite, pushes through and forces Sapnap to take a step back this time. Sapnap doesn’t falter, just digs his feet in and strains back just as hard. A knee wedges itself into his side in an instant, iron and muscle bouncing against his gut and stealing his breath. He falls back again with a pained gasp and takes advantage of Butler’s advance to ram him again, go low and use Nightmare to bash his sword out of the way so Sapnap can drive him back once more. Butler brings a heavy fist down over his back this time but Sapnap tumbles through it and manages to lift him, throwing him over his shoulder like a big, clanking bag of potatoes.

“Sapnap!” George yells in warning, “Pull back! Too far!”

Sapnap listens, gives up his advantage and retreats again, panting. Sweat’s formed at his forehead, Nightmare heavy and thirsty for more in his hand. Butler scrambles off the ground, shoving his helmet back into place. He landed wrong on his arm, Sapnap can tell, and he holds his sword in a less solid position.

“Come on, Butler. I’m ready.” He tosses Nightmare to his other hand, spreads his feet and crouches down. His blood is singing. This is what he was meant to do, where he’s meant to be. He never feels more like himself than he does when he’s in the middle of a proper brawl. Knighthood is all well and good, but Dream was the proper knight. Sapnap’s blood calls for something a little less chivalrous. When he inhales through his nose, he smells the tang of slight fear coming off Butler for the first time.

Butler eventually comes. Sapnap goes low again but Butler is ready this time, too, and Nightmare saves Sapnap from losing a chunk or two of flesh from his shoulder. Sapnap presses on the blade with his free hand, forcing Butler to take steps back again, then goes loose and lets him fall forward with the lack of support against his force. He whirls, Butler’s back exposed to Nightmare, and takes the chance to bring the blade down in a wide, momentous arc. The sharp edge of unbreakable stone bites through iron armor similarly to how a dull knife may cut through cold butter; rough, uneven, but inevitable with enough force. There is more than enough force.

When Butler cries out, it is quiet but severe. Sapnap withdraws Nightmare with a sharp tug, retreats again to Karl and Quackity, whose eyes are pinballing between his fight with the swordsman and George holding Liaria and Billiam captive.

“Boy, do I feel useless.” Karl mutters just loud enough to be heard, “This would be so different if I had my potion stand.”

“You’re not useless.” Quackity points out, “You caused all this! That’s definitely a use. A bad one, but -”

“Have you ever considered a life of silence?” Karl asks with a casual voice, “Just, like, a suggestion, but the things you say sometimes suck and I think you should take it into consideration.”

“Noted.” Quackity huffs a nervous laugh, “S-Sapnap, good hit!”

“Good hit!” Karl echoes, “Maybe they’ll fucking *leave* now!”

“Never! Not until we avenge -”

“You hated them, Billiam, you freakin’ clusternutter, you hated all of them! You hate *these* two!”

“Our personal feelings aside, we were a team!”

“I,” Karl hisses back, sounding truly angry for the first time in the entire encounter, “was *not* on your team.”

“Perhaps.” Billiam points a finger, “But that makes you an enemy. We won’t allow you to walk away. Butler!”

Butler stands, listing to his injured side for only a moment before standing straight again and lifting his sword. “Stand...aside.”

Sapnap frowns at him. Butler's voice, tinged in pain even as he holds himself steady, is younger than he would have expected. He wishes he had time to examine his opponent more, figure out exactly what kind of relationship this warrior has to two disparaging aristocrats. At the very least, he can give him a chance. "You don't have to do this."

"Stand aside."

Sapnap nods, sighing. "I can respect that. Sorry it turned out this way. If you'd caught up, like, last week, things may have turned out a little differently."

"Butler!"

Butler throws himself into Sapnap's strike range with none of his previous grace. Like a rabid animal, he swings his sword like a club and Sapnap doesn't flinch as he lifts Nightmare above his head to glide the blow down and off to the side. He swings his free hand, smashes a closed fist into Butler's temple through the helmet with all the force he can muster. His fingers ache. Butler drops like a brick, sword clattering to the ground and out of his limp hand.

There is a tense silence, and then Billiam screams in rage.

"Butler, you *complete idiot!!!*"

"Hey!" Sapnap turns, points Nightmare toward Billiam's suddenly terrified face with a growl, "Shut the *fuck* up. I don't know what you have over that guy, but he could fucking skewer you like a fish over a fire so keep your fucking mouth *shut*."

"Billiam," Karl steps forward, placing his hand on Sapnap's sword arm, not pushing it down but gentling him as he drops his voice to something softer, "Just go. Take Butler and Liaria and leave. You won't win this, but that doesn't mean you have to die here."

"Speak for yourself." George grumbles, "I've already got an arrow picked out that would look real fuckin' nice sticking out of his dumb, fat head."

"Okay." Karl amends, "Apparently you can't."

"No." Sapnap lowers Nightmare slowly, letting the rage bleed out of him, "Take them and leave. If I catch you coming after Karl again, I'll do what your knight won't."

Billiam pulls an ugly face, but Liaria tugs at his arm firmly.

"We're outclassed, my dear." She says with a shaky voice, "I've been *shot*. I need a doctor. The world is getting so dizzy, Billiam, dear, I fear I'll pass on if we don't retreat soon."

"*Prime!*" Billiam throws her hand off and stands up, "*Fine*. Fine! If the both of you want to give up so easily, *fine*, we'll retreat!"

Sapnap wants to sneer something back, but he keeps it behind his teeth and steps away from Butler, who is still laying on the ground of the courtyard. There's a pool of blood growing from his side but Sapnap thinks if he finds a doctor he'll survive, perhaps with a slight ringing in his ears for a few days but otherwise okay.

He stands between Billiam and his friends, Nightmare down but ready, as the piglin-hybrid scurries to collect his man, kneeling at his side to shove the helmet off his head and roughly smack his cheek a few times. Prime, he really is just a kid.

“Butler.” Billiam hisses, “Butler, get *up*, you fool.”

“Let me,” Karl pushes Billiam away, kneeling by Butler’s side to carefully check his slack face over for damage, “You’re going to hurt his brain like that, he needs a doctor, same as Liaria. A doctor and rest.”

Billiam spits at Karl and it lands on Karl’s face, but Karl stonily continues to check Butler over instead of responding. A moment later, he’s pulled out bandages from one of his endless pockets, tying them tight to Butler’s side to stop the bleeding. When he tries to hand it to Billiam, the other man looks at him like Karl just tried to hand him a pile of shit.

Sapnap can’t watch. He turns away in disgust, eyes going to George, who has begun to pick his way down from the patio.

“Be careful.” He can’t help but call, taking a step toward George.

And then Karl screams.

“Sapnap!” Quackity shouts, “Watch out!”

Sapnap turns around, bringing Nightmare up to defend himself, but he’s late - Karl’s shoved to the ground and Billiam launches himself and Butler’s sword toward Sapnap with speed common to the piglin. He prepares himself for the blow, only for a different attack to come from the side.

Quackity is a blur, shoving Sapnap out of the way and Sapnap watches in horror as Billiam’s sword grazes across Quackity’s back - a glancing blow, but a painful one by the sound of Quackity’s scream.

“*Retreat!?*” Billiam screams, spit flying, “I am *Sir Billiam the Third*, I will *never* retreat!”

The diamond sword leaves Quackity’s flesh and Quackity drops with a cry - Karl’s terrified “*Q!*” echoing off the walls as Billiam raises the sword again and Karl throws himself toward Quackity protectively, covering his body with his own -

Sapnap swings Nightmare.

Billiam’s body drops and his head rolls. The sword kisses the ground with a sharp clatter. Liaria sobs, once, and then goes deathly silent.

“Quackity.” Sapnap drops to his knees, “Quackity, fuck, Q,”

“Quackity, man,” Karl pushes himself up and off of Quackity’s smaller body, sitting back on his knees so they can both get a closer look. There’s blood, but not - not a deadly amount. Not yet. Quackity wears leather armor, the diamond bit through it like butter, but it had to get through his cloak first, and the blow bounced instead of slicing straight through. If Sapnap can get to it, he has paste in his bag that will help seal any broken flesh and protect it.

Quackity whimpers. Sapnap’s throat closes up.

He wasn’t paying attention. This happened because Sapnap got distracted. He knew there was a danger, right there, right in front of him, and he let himself get distracted.

“Baby,” Karl says suddenly, voice going soft, “Big Q, baby, can you hear me?”

Quackity takes in a deep, shuddering breath and nods a little. He’s hidden his face in his arms, his entire body trembling from the pain.

“It’s over.” Karl places a careful hand on Quackity’s shoulder and Quackity flinches away with his whole body.

“Don’t -” Quackity gasps out, voice high and reedy and *terrified*, “Sir, please, don’t, don’t do it again, sir, I swear, I swear, I’ll get better, sir, I’ll -”

“No.” Karl says firmly, “No one’s doing it again. You’re safe. I’m not him. Where are you, Q? Think. Who am I?”

Quackity slowly, painfully lifts his eyes above his arm. Sapnap feels sick at the fear, the pain in them.

“Karl.” Quackity breathes out slowly.

“That’s me, baby. We’re traveling, remember? We’ve got a job to complete. Some stuff to bring home. Right?”

Quackity blinks. “Right.”

“And look!” Karl ropes an arm around Sapnap’s shoulders, pulls him closer so Quackity can see him, “We have a whole Sapnap right here. Now, would Sapnap let him hurt you?”

Him? Sapnap doesn’t know who this *sir* is. Quackity has never mentioned a *sir* before. Sapnap wants to know who *him* is and he wants to know why *him* has put such a look on Quackity’s face. Does *him* have something to do with the scar? With the magic rush job of its healing? And why does that single thought send unwarranted anger flooding through him? He has no right to feel this way - even if Quackity did just save his life, and is blinking back at him with slow recognition. No right, but he does, and Nightmare whispers for him to go hunting.

“Sapnap’s here.” Quackity blinks, eyes starting to clear up, “He wouldn’t let....”

“Exactly.” Karl says soothingly. “It hurts, right? That’s why you thought he was here?”

Quackity hums. His eyes are glazed, though with the pain or from unwanted memories, Sapnap isn’t sure.

“Okay. But he isn’t. You just got hurt. But I’ll take care of you. Remember last time you got hurt? When we first started traveling? Remember how I took care of it?”

Quackity nods.

“That’s what’s gonna happen this time, too. I’m gonna take care of it. Can I see?”

“No.” Quackity sits up suddenly, “You can’t. It’s fine.”

“Baby -”

“No.” Quackity blinks and then he’s *back*, Sapnap can see when he fully returns to his senses, “*Fucking ow, fucking ow, Karl, ow, ow, ow.*”

“I know!” Karl lets go of Sapnap and his voice is back to normal, like none of that just happened, and it leaves Sapnap reeling, “What a wound! You were so brave, dude, what the fuck?”

“More like stupid.” Quackity shakes his head, his shoulders, winces widely, “*Fuck, that hurts. Are you okay, Sapnap?*”

“Huh?” Sapnap looks down at himself, “I am the least hurt member of this party right now, dude. You - you didn’t have to do that.”

“I owed you.” Quackity grins, big and wide, “For the rock.”

Sapnap wants to say *no*, *I owed you for the cave*. He keeps it to himself and just shakes his head. No reason to do this now.

“Come on.” George appears at their side, looking serious, “We can’t stay here. Quackity needs a doctor.”

Sapnap looks around - Butler is still unconscious. Liaria is gone. Billiam is lacking a head. They do need to leave.

“It’s really okay, guys.” Quackity slowly pushes himself to his feet, letting Karl help with only a mild flinch.

“It isn’t.” George says firmly, “You could get an infection. It may need to be sewn.”

“It doesn’t.” Quackity says firmly with a forced smile, “Let’s just go, yeah?”

“Quackity...” Sapnap drops his voice, “Come on, okay? Let’s just let someone look at it. We’ve already been here longer than we should be, another hour won’t change anything.”

Quackity’s mouth twists, “I...It’s really fine.”

“I believe you.” Karl nods, “But I want it to be *good*. So we should visit a doctor while we’re in town.”

“...fine.” Quackity gives in, “It’s really fine, but *fine*, if you guys *insist*, we can visit a fuckin’ doctor or some shit before we leave. Fuck.”

Sapnap lets himself smile. The relief sweeps in, cool and refreshing. He didn’t realize how tense he’d been until he hears Quackity finally agree to let someone check out his wound.

Sapnap will analyze the angry pull to find out who *him* is later, when things have settled.

George kneels, picks up the diamond sword Quackity must have dropped in his haste.

“Let’s go, boys.”

Quackity takes one step and collapses. Karl catches him with a shout, Sapnap only seconds behind to help him lower Quackity back down.

“Ow.” Quackity says, dizzy, “Okay, maybe it’s not as fine as I -”

“*This way!*” a terrifyingly familiar voice suddenly echoes from the same alley that Karl’s old friends had appeared from, “I *told* you following those idiots would work better than your *feelings*, Wilbur!”

“Tommy, stop getting so far ahead!”

“Go faster then, Wil, do you want that prissy fuck to catch them before we do!?”

Sapnap looks at George, both of their faces draining of color.

“Oh, no.” George gapes, “H-how did they...”

“Fuck.” Sapnap says at the same time. “Okay. I’ll carry Q. We need to go. We need to *go*, right now.”

“A doctor -” Karl starts, but he’s already unclasping his cloak to throw over Quackity like a protective shield. For as comforting as it is to wear, Sapnap wouldn’t be surprised if it were somehow enchanted to offer protection of some sort.

“We’ll have to do our best.” Sapnap shakes his head, scooping Quackity up carefully, “If we have to sneak back in later tonight, we will, but we need to *go* -”

“Heeey-oooo!!! Prince *Gooooooooogyyyyyyyyy!!* Tubbo *smells* you, your royal *piece of shitness!!*”

“Fuckin’ *Tommy*.” George curses. Sapnap hefts Quackity over his shoulder, who mumbles in protest but doesn’t move, and stands up straight.

“Go!” Sapnap puts a hand on Quackity’s back to keep him stable and grabs Karl’s wrist, who quickly tangles their hands together. George looks the way they came and then bursts in the opposite direction. Sapnap has no idea if that will work, but he follows closely, Karl and Quackity towed along like important but unwieldy luggage.

“Who is that!?” Karl asks as they run from the courtyard, arrows and bodies left behind.

“Fuckin’ Wilbur and his little stooge brothers,” Sapnap doesn’t think to lie, just keeps jogging after George.

“Oh, okay.” Karl nods, “And who are they, exactly?”

“Right now, they’re old friends like those old friends of yours,” George says glibly and speeds up. Sapnap can’t keep up, not without hurting Quackity, which he realizes when he tries and Quackity’s breathing hitches as he tries not to let show how badly he’s hurting. *Fuck*.

“*Fuck!*” He can’t help but shout in frustration. He should have made them leave immediately. He should have made them all wait in the woods while he went into town and picked up their money and bought their supplies and then they should have disappeared. They should still be in that fucking cave, in all honesty, waiting for things to dry so they don’t slip and slide down the side of a mountain for hours all morning. Evening is beginning to fall, sunset only half an hour or so away.

Sapnap doesn’t know what to do.

“It’s okay.” Karl says from behind him and squeezes his hand tighter, “Sapnap. It’s gonna be okay.”

“Yeah.” George says from in front of him, unphased, “Absolutely it will. It’s gonna be fine. Actually, it’s going to be more than fine. It’s going to actually be good. So good, the best.”

Quackity pats his chest awkwardly without words.

Sapnap doesn’t answer any of them. If he gives Quackity to Karl, Karl won’t be able to move fast, but he and George could easily support him between them. They could run while Sapnap stays behind and holds those ditzy idiots off. They’ve brought Wilbur and Tommy, Tubbo, Sapnap thinks he heard Tommy mention. If Tubbo’s here, then that endermen-hybrid betrothed of his is probably there, too. Technoblade might be with them. Fuck, if Technoblade is with them, Sapnap won’t be able to buy his friends much time. He’ll have to try.

“Take Quackity.” He says when they take another turn and it leads back to the busy square they started out their run in, “Take Quackity and go. I’ll try to hold them off.”

“No.” George says dismissively and keeps walking.

“George -” he tries but George turns so fast he nearly takes Sapnap to the ground, and Quackity and Karl with him.

“*Shut up.*” George hisses, shoving a finger hard into his chest, “Shut up. No. I’m not leaving you. I’m not losing you. They’ll take you back to the castle, and you’re not going *anywhere near that throne*, do you *hear* me, Sapnap? Do you hear me? That is an *order*. Shut up and *keep walking*.”

Sapnap seals his mouth shut and keeps walking. Karl holds his hand so hard it hurts, but that’s a comfort in this panic. Quackity is trembling over his shoulder. Sapnap has no choice but to stop and adjust, and Karl and George help so that he’s got Quackity on his back, face hidden in Sapnap’s shoulder and Sapnap’s arms under his thighs to keep him steady so all the blood doesn’t rush to his head and make him pass out. That leaves Nightmare in George’s hands and the diamond sword in Karl’s.

“Fuck.” Karl says for the first time, sounding a little worried.

“It’s fine.” George *orders* and Karl goes silent.

A voice that sounds a little too much like Dream curls, familiar, into his mind. *Funny. The times George is the most like royalty is when he is doing his absolute best to run away from it.*

It is fine - up until Sapnap hears the marching. It’s an instinctual rhythm, one he feels in his gut even as he hears it with his ears, the steady ‘one-two-one-two-one-two’ of trained knights. He sees the flag before he sees them, a familiar pattern - lilac on silver.

“Fuck.” He repeats, his voice faint as George stops in the middle of the crowd. Once again, the townspeople part right down the middle of the road. Sapnap drags George along with them, hoping to blend in and let the knights pass by.

And it may have worked. It may have been that the four of them could just pull their hoods up, duck low and wait for the small order to pass on. It may have worked that luck was on their side, just this once, even though Sapnap recognizes Punz immediately, and Callahan, and Alyssa in those ranks, and Sam and Ponk, side by side. It may have been different in another world, but in this one, he’d know his friends by the slopes of their shoulders and the grips on their swords, just as they’d know him. He trained by their sides, to the last of them. He would have died for them. He loved them, once. Still does, in a deep part of him. He doesn’t understand how they can still march under that flag as they hunt George down to be destroyed, but he loves them despite it.

Punz spots them first, even with George’s hood pulled low over his face and Sapnap misshapen by another man on his back.

Punz lifts a sword, points at them with a firm face. Sapnap sees him struggle, though, behind the familiar mask. He doesn’t know how they ended up on opposite sides of a sword, either, Sapnap thinks.

“Sapnap.” Punz announces, “Prince George.”

“Punz.” Sapnap swallows. Karl stills at his back.

“I’m not a prince anymore, Punz.” George says loudly, voice unshaken. The crowd parts like a

wave, peeling away until there is only George, standing in front of the rest of them, Karl and Sapnap supporting Quackity.

Blood drips onto the pale cobblestone path.

Punz starts to respond, but there's a commotion from the way Sapnap and his little party had come and Sapnap barely has to glance over to see a bright blond head of hair popping up above the crowd, a teenage boy sitting on the shoulders of a ridiculously tall enderman-hybrid.

"Hey, you lot!" Tommy's voice breaks the silence, his arms waving, a sword held in one, Ranboo swaying under his weight with a worried grimace, "Hey! We found them first, pissants! We found them first, back the fuck off!! We found them first!!"

"Yeah!" And there he is, the revolutionary himself, Wilbur Soot, shoving his way into the open area left behind by the townspeople. He still commands crowds, even if he has shed his revolutionary clothes for a dark brown coat and a scruffy beanie. He has a white streak in his hair and the way he walks has shifted; he looks older, more weathered than the bright-eyed freedom fighter that Sapnap had once crossed swords with, "We found him first, Sir Knight, so kindly turn your order back from whence you came."

"If it isn't the failed politician." Punz sighs, "Look, Wilbur, just because you followed us here doesn't mean you found them first. It doesn't matter, anyway. We outrank you. We outnumber you. The prince is coming with us."

"We did not *follow* you, we used our own means to find them!"

"Run." Quackity breathes, face hidden in Sapnap's shoulder and under Karl's bright coat, "Drop me and run."

Sapnap squeezes Quackity's thighs tighter to his sides.

"It'll be fine." George breathes out.

"Karl." Sapnap slowly lets go of Karl's hand, hoping not to catch anyone's attention just yet, "Take Quackity. When I give the signal, you two run, okay?"

"But -"

"Just trust me." Sapnap meets Karl's eyes, warm and worried as they trace Sapnap's face, "There's a lot going on that you might not understand."

"I think I've pieced it together, hotstuff." Karl says seriously.

"Then you know this is above your head." Sapnap says, not unkindly, "Take Quackity."

Karl takes him. Quackity transfers easily, curls his arms weakly around Karl's shoulders and Karl holds his weight without a struggle despite his lanky appearance. Sapnap takes Nightmare back from George. The hilt is warm, but rapidly cools under his touch despite how hot he's running right now.

George doesn't seem to have noticed. Sapnap lets it go, sick in his soul.

"Remember." George says gently, "These were our friends. Please don't..."

"I won't." Sapnap agrees. He won't kill them. Not any of his fellow knights, nor the ex-

revolutionaries, who wanted only to help George achieve his original goal in the first place, before the coup fucked it all up. If Sapnap could get his hands on maybe Wilbur, definitely Eret, on *Schlatt*...But no. He only has Nightmare within reach right now. It will be enough.

“Well, well, well.” Tommy says as Ranboo, Tubbo by his side, stumbles from the crowd to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with Wilbur, Tommy towering tall over them all on his shoulders. “I see we found you at last, Prince Gogy. Sapnap.”

“Tommy.” Sapnap nods.

“Where’s your boyfriend, George?” Tommy peeks around, Ranboo’s hands on his thighs and his quick reflexes the only thing keeping him up, “Dream!? Dream, you proud bastard, show your stupid, ugly face! I’ve got questions for you! All these months, I’ve dreamed of this, if you’ll excuse the pun! Finally, I’m allowed to kick your greeny-weeny ass!”

No one moves. Sapnap feels like he’s been stabbed. He feels dizzy. Nightmare goes slack in his grasp. George grabs his head, groaning low and deep.

“Come out, come out!” Tommy screams, hands to his mouth to act as a megaphone, “Can’t hide from us, Dream!”

“Stop.” Sapnap gasps, a hand to his chest. The grief is overwhelming. Tommy doesn’t know. They all don’t know. That means - that means that there hasn’t been a body found yet. That means that there’s a chance - that means - “Tommy, stop -”

“Sapnap?” Karl says worriedly, “Sapnap, you have to breathe.”

Sapnap can’t breathe. He can’t breathe, which means he can’t fight, which means that George is defenseless, George, who is groaning in pain, knees shaking underneath him as he rides out the most inconveniently timed migraine ever.

“We won’t wait for your knight to show up.” Punz points his sword at Sapnap, “We can take you out before he comes back from wherever he is. He isn’t *here*, Tommy. He’d have come out by now, if he was! You don’t have an arrow in that stupid big mouth of yours yet, so *obviously* they’ve been separated.”

Sapnap grabs Nightmare tight again, the hilt freezing in his palm. “You won’t take us anywhere.”

“Come peacefully, Sap.” Sam, this time, sighs, face going soft, “Aren’t you sick of running? Come home. And you, Prince George...take your place on the throne, your majesty.”

“Don’t call me that.” George presses both hands to his head, eyes clenching closed, “D-don’t call me that, Sam. I’m not. I won’t be. I’ll never sit on that *fucking* throne, you’ll have to kill me because I won’t do it, I won’t, I won’t!”

“George,” Sam says, in that gentle voice that speaks to pumpkin pie and picnics with Ponk, “George, come h-”

“What do you mean, Dream’s obviously not here!?” Tommy cuts in, “Well, then, where the fuck is he!? He doesn’t leave his Gogy’s side to piss, why’d he leave his side in the middle of a run-away, huh? Makes no sense, does it? ‘Course he’s around here! Dream! Dream, come out!”

Sapnap shakes. “*Tommy!*” He snarls, “Dream isn’t *here!*”

“Then where *is* he, Sapnap!?”

The words hover on the tip of his tongue, all the ‘*I wish I knew*’s and the ‘*I’ve been looking, don’t you think I’ve been looking?*’, but all of it curdles and comes to nothing.

gone. gone, gone, gone.

Sapnap tries to breathe through the pain. He doesn’t know. He doesn’t know where Dream is. He doesn’t know if Dream’s *alive*, or dead or -

“Charge.” Punz orders and the knights all at once begin to move forward, a quick advance bearing down with little recourse.

“Not if we get there *first!*” Wilbur points, “Tommy, Tubbo, get them!”

George collapses on his knees.

Sapnap raises Nightmare, trying to breathe, trying to breathe, trying to breathe -

“Dream.” he whispers out loud, his eyes going hazy with tears that start to steam away immediately, as he prays for something, anything, help, answers, whatever comes - “*Dream* -”

“You promised -” George suddenly shouts, “XD, I *need you* -”

If Sapnap had ever been in the center of an explosion, he thinks that what happens next may be the exact feeling he would have experienced. Between one blink and the next, there is a burst of energy unlike he’s ever felt before. The space in front of him splits, the pale pink of early sunset broken apart as if someone simply parted a curtain. Light spasms, shakes, shatters apart. He feels the buzz of it in his skin, an electric shock that’s never-ending. It’s a tear, a rip in the fabric of reality, and it sends Sapnap reeling with the wave of pure and utter *wrongness* that sweeps through him. When he opens his eyes on the next blink, every single person around them is flat on their back and the world is silent in a dazed haze. In the distance, he hears a child’s wailing, a dog barking over and over, endlessly. All that remain standing are he and Karl, George kneeling at their feet with his head in his hands and Quackity, breathing shallow, unconscious on Karl’s back.

Them, and a figure standing - no, floating in front of them. They wear a thick, bright green cloak, so flowy and rippy that it must be enchanted to do so, a solid green that covers the figure from head to feet. It expands outwards and where it meets reality the very air seems to shiver with that same buzzing energy from before. This figure is wrong, Sapnap knows it deep in his bones, it takes all he has not to shy away from their very presence. When they turn around, instead of a face, there is only a smooth, porcelain mask. What adorns the shiny stone is a sideways ‘X’ for eyes and a wide grin painted with black lines.

“XD.” George looks up from his hands. At first, Sapnap thinks he’s reading the letters on the mask, until he speaks again, “XD, you came.”

“Of course I came, George.” XD says and his voice echoes in the air, in Sapnap’s ears, deep into the marrow of his bones. **“I told you that all you had to do was ask.”**

“We need to escape, XD. Help us.” George reaches out a hand, his other still holding his head as if it’s all he has holding his skull together. The pain in his eyes is apparent, the migraine obviously sudden and overwhelming, “We’re trapped.”

“You need to go home, George.” XD says with a sad lilt to his voice.

“Please.” George says again, simple, and stretches his fingers out.

XD, with a harrowing sigh that shakes the very dust from the air, reaches out. His fingers - long, gloved in green satin - touch George's. He turns his masked face to Sapnap, who regards him with terror and a raised sword, and drops another gloved hand on Sapnap's shoulder. He fights the urge to recoil, to grab George and run, even as something deep inside him settles and sighs at the contact. Karl grabs onto Sapnap's hand and Sapnap grips him back tight, confused and scared.

There is a *pop* and the world dissolves around them as Sapnap watches Tommy sit up slowly from flat on his back, rub his face, and say "Who the *fuck* is *tha* -"

The world around them disappears into nothing but dizzying swirls of color and light.

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

As always we love you and your comments and kudos and all your love so much!!! thank you!!!

we would love to hear all your theories and ideas so please pop them down in the comments - we wanna see what you think!

tw for this chapter// descriptions of injury, wound care, mentions of past abuse, past trauma and trauma responses

For a moment, Sapnap is aware that there should be something around him; air, leaves, trees, his friends, but there is nothing but static, building on the edges of his consciousness. It's like the breath is pulled from his lungs, the split second at the moment of detonation. Everything spins, and he shuts his eyes, even though he isn't sure whether he is actually still flesh and bone at this moment.

When he opens his eyes again, his face is pressed into damp moss, and he chokes on dirt. Karl's hand is still in his and they're both holding on so hard that Sapnap thinks Karl's nails have broken skin. There is something warm seeping into his side, and it only takes a moment for his brain to kick back into gear and sit up.

For a start, this is certainly not the pine forest that had surrounded the small village by the mountains. Instead, the air is warm and humid, acacia and jungle wood trees stretching up into the sky, vines dangling.

Unlike the rest of them, George is able to stand on shaky legs. He still has a hand pressed to his forehead, but his face is clearing slowly, and his other hand is still held gently by...by...

If it weren't for the mask, pale porcelain and stark black lines, the figure could have blended into the treeline. There's that static effect again, almost like a mirage of water on a hot day lining the edges of it's - his? - cloak, but it has muted, lessened. The figure, once tall and imposing and floating at least a foot off the ground in front of an accompaniment of guards and mercenaries, seemingly utterly nonplussed, is being helped to sit by George. He's still tall, Sapnap notes distantly, but he's unarmed. The figure isn't exactly shaking, but there is a tenseness to his shoulders, a measure to his breaths that spells careful control.

"Are you alright?" George is asking, all of his focus on this stranger, "I've never seen you like this, are you okay?"

The figure - George called him XD, what kind of name is that? - nods.

"Do not fear," He says in a voice that would shake glass if there were nearby glass to shake, **"Teleporting so many takes more energy than I had anticipated."**

Sapnap was about to ask, to demand answers using the thousand questions running through his mind on repeat, but then their words register and he scrambles around, pulling on Karl's hand.

“Karl,” he says, unthinking, panicked, “Karl, *Quackity* -”

Thanking all the gods, Prime and Mother Earth and the Solar Queen and any others that he could remember from his theology lessons, Sapnap turns around to see both of his companions beside him.

Relief turns to horror, though, as Karl maneuvers Quackity from his back and lays him on the soft moss. The normally tanned man is pale and sweaty, his breathing shaky, the vegetation under him stains a brown shade of crimson in the places his back presses down.

“*Quackity*,” Sapnap says, unable to say anything else, “*Quackity*, Q, come on, man, wake up.”

Karl smoothes out Quackity’s hair from his face, careful not to dislodge the beanie, and then begins to rummage in the multicolored cloak that Quackity was now wrapped in, eventually pulling out another roll of bandages.

“How many of those have you got, dude?” Sapnap asks, the joke tightening in his throat, choking him.

“As many as we need,” Karl replies, deadly serious, “I don’t think we can get a doctor out here and it might need stitches. Do you know how? I’m not very good at it but if you can’t...”

George, who apparently had been listening, says, “XD, can you...?” but trails off when XD shakes his head.

“I will need to recover,” He says, **“Before I can try more.”**

“I have a few potions,” Sapnap says, surprising even himself, “In the enderchest - here.”

Correction, they have exactly one potion of healing and one potion of regeneration, both having been saved for an emergency that Sapnap hoped would never come. Karl looks like he is about to refuse, but even in unconsciousness, Quackity winces in pain. Karl takes the potion of regeneration without a word.

Together, because George is still fretting over whoever the fuck this XD thing is, they carefully move Quackity so his head is tilted forward. Sapnap brackets Quackity’s head in careful palms and wonders if Quackity always looked this small without his loud motions to take up space.

“I’m here, Q,” He says, gentle, even though he is fairly sure that Quackity can’t hear him, “I’m here.”

All the frantic energy is gone from Karl, now. He steadies the potion, tilting it oh so gently into Quackity’s open mouth, letting natural reflexes do what they can.

Regen won’t heal the wound. But it will stop Quackity inching ever closer to a state that they couldn’t pull him back from, and help numb the pain somewhat. With any luck, it might also keep him sleeping until he and Karl are done. Sapnap is glad; he doesn’t want to think of Quackity bearing the pain of being stitched up while conscious.

Unfortunately, the universe wants to humble them. As the potion reaches its end, Quackity coughs, lurching upwards with a cry and spraying Karl with the pink liquid. Neither of them care as Quackity immediately shrieks in pain, curling up and into himself. He’s trembling, though, from pain or fear, it’s difficult to tell. Quackity scared is quickly becoming one of Sapnap’s least favorite experiences. He reeks of fear. It’s nearly overwhelming, acrid and biting in Sapnap’s nose. Distantly, he’s reminded of cheap liquor.

Both of them press forward, though Sapnap hesitates to touch Quackity just yet, thinking about red palms and Karl's gentle questioning. Then Quackity's pained breaths hitch into a sob, and Sapnap thinks, unbidden, that his heart might just break.

"Q, hey, Quackity, baby," Karl starts, in that same tone of voice from before, when Quackity was first injured, "You're okay, you're with me and Sapnap and George and -" Sapnap sees Karl's gaze shift to XD, the entity staring at them impassively from the treeline while George tries to coax something out of him. Sapnap isn't sure if it's working.

"You're safe," Karl repeats, pulling Quackity's hand into his own as Sapnap braces Quackity's shoulders. He can't see Quackity's face, but he can see Karl's as it slips into a gentle smile.

"Karl," Quackity says, and Sapnap holds back a sigh of relief. He doesn't know what he would do if Quackity had looked at him like he thought Sapnap was going to hurt him. Like he had after the fight, memories clouding his eyes.

"Hey Q," Karl says, "There you are."

"Where...?"

"Don't worry about that right now," Sapnap says, as assuring as he can be when he himself is burning with the desire to ask exactly the same question, "But we've gotta treat your wound, Quackity. We got you a regen, but we need to check and see if the bleeding's stopped or if it still needs stitches."

Under his hands, Quackity's shoulders tense. "No."

"Q, you said you'd see a doctor -"

"Then get a doctor," Quackity grits out.

"We can't," Sapnap says, "Not out here, not in time."

"Then I'll deal with it, I'll be fine -"

Karl shakes his head, "Absolutely fucking not, Quackity. No fucking way."

"*Karl,*"

"*Quackity,*"

Sapnap cuts in, voice sharp and commanding, "Both of you, stop. Quackity, I'm sorry, I really am, dude, but we have to treat it. I'm not surviving three rounds of people trying to kill or capture us only for you to bleed out in the middle of fucking nowhere just because you're being a stubborn idiot. Whatever it is you're scared of, we'll deal with it."

"M not scared," Quackity mumbles like a liar, trying to turn to look at Sapnap only to groan in pain. He's trying to shift, Sapnap realizes, he's trying to sit up and away from them, shoulders hunched over, hiked up to his ears. Sapnap wants to put a sword through whoever taught Quackity that he should be so small.

"Baby," Karl says, so soft it's barely a word, and he cups Quackity's pale face with steady hands, tracing featherlight fingers over his cheeks, "Q, please. Let us help."

Sapnap holds his breath. Under his hands, Quackity's shoulders rise and fall in a staccato rhythm,

short and sharp, stuttering as he tries to match Karl's exaggerated motions.

"Fine," Quackity says, quiet, defeated, "Fine, just... just get it over with."

"I'll be as careful as I can," Sapnap says, "The regen should help, but..."

Quackity just nods. Sapnap can imagine he's got his eyes closed. From what he can see, Karl has moved so Quackity can hold both of his hands, and his grip is white-knuckled.

Sapnap starts by taking off Karl's cloak, the beautiful embroidery stained dark, the bright colors seeming to merge together with the rust crimson. Quackity's cloak, which was over his armor, has to be stained, but it's already dark brown, and so the color blends in. Sapnap makes a mental note to fix it whenever he next gets the chance.

Finally, he turns his attention to the leather armor covering Quackity's long-sleeved shirt. He frowns. There's a slight bulge to the back that he hadn't noticed before, hidden as it was under his cloak. It must be a defect in the leather; it's something that's not that unusual. Right now, it's honestly difficult to tell what is leather and what is blood. Quackity is still breathing with deliberate, careful inhales and exhales, but his shoulders shudder as Sapnap carefully unbuckles the armor and slides it off.

If anything, the bulge is even more noticeable under Quackity's torn and bloodstained underclothes. And Sapnap could have sworn that the undershirt was blue, not yellow, and made with woven linen, not... not...

"Oh, *Q*," Sapnap breathes out. Quackity shakes, a sob escaping through his carefully controlled breathing.

Under Quackity's ruined shirt, tied down by a tight strap to keep them flush against his skin, are a pair of small, yellow wings. The feathers are in disarray, stained red, and Sapnap can see the wound now, a cut straight through the most sensitive inner feathers. He's afraid to touch, to do anything that might make things worse. For a moment, he hesitates, fingers brushing over the soft feathers before his mind snaps back into action. First, it's loosening the strap. Quackity chokes in relief when his wings stretch free, his uninjured one shaking away all that pent-up energy, awkward and weak. Sapnap can tell the other one is desperate to do the same from the way it quivers, but it must be far too painful to move. Fuck, they had been stuck in the cave for *days* and traveled before that, too. How long had he bound them? How can he not be screaming in agony as the muscle works its way loose? Or has he spent years getting accustomed to this specific kind of ache?

"Quackity," Karl says, eyes widening as he sees them. "My gods, Quackity, they're -"

"Please don't," Quackity says, "Please, I don't -"

"They're *beautiful*," Karl says, voice full of awe, "Holy shit, baby, they're so beautiful."

They are. Sapnap has seen precious few avian hybrids; they're rare, the genetics often unpredictable when it comes to passing on the wings to their children. There's a reason Wilbur never inherited his father's.

Quackity's wings are a soft, gentle yellow, the color of the sun at sunrise, echoing a hazy summer's morning. They're dappled with spots of chocolate brown, deep and rich, shades of hazel creating shifting patterns that Sapnap knows he could marvel at for hours.

As lovely as they are, they're marred. It's not just the cut on the right wing, staining the feathers a

rusty red; there are years of injuries that are clear even to Sapnap. Here is an old burn, snaking through his left primaries, here is a patch where the feathers have grown back uneven, the flesh underneath raised and red, as though they had been forcefully plucked from him. But it is the sight of the deeply ingrained scar between the third and fourth metacarpal bones that makes heat flare in Sapnap's chest like a livewire, white-hot anger that he has to forcefully choke down.

Sapnap is a hunter, first and foremost. It's what he was trained for by his dad, even before his knighthood. He spent hours with the birds in the royal aviary, the hawks and the falcons, each trained in their own motions by the hunters and the groundskeepers. He knew the others too, the birds that had never been trained for hunting, but for decoration. He knows birds, even if avian wings aren't exactly the same, he knows what this is.

The previous queen, George's maternal grandmother, took a liking towards fancy and exotic birds. She enjoyed having them decorate her lawns and fountains, but did not want them to fly away. Clipping their wings was not always efficient, with the feathers growing back season after season, so they proceeded with something more permanent. The groundskeeper called it pinioning.

He remembers the huge old birds still around from her time, feathers of pink and violet and indigo; how they would huddle at the side of the lake in the palace grounds, unable to fly if a predator came for them. How they would cower if a human came near them with shears. The groundskeeper had told him once about a wound left open to heal naturally, a cut to the deepest part of the wing without anesthetic, about the shock that would inevitably set in if the bird was too old.

How, for a bird, it was akin to cutting off their hands.

"Sap," Karl's voice cuts through the anger, through the complete and utter rage that had threatened to overwhelm him then. "Sapnap, how does it look?"

Sapnap swallows. Getting angry over an old injury won't help Quackity now, might even hurt him more. *But this wasn't an injury, a part of him whispers, whoever did this, it was done deliberately. To hurt him.*

He forces himself to concentrate on the matter at hand. Quackity matters more than his rage.

"It's not that deep," Sapnap says, his tongue like lead. "The regen stopped most of the bleeding, but it'll be sensitive to movement. We need to stitch it to make sure it doesn't open up again."

Quackity nods, jerkily.

"I've got that wine," Karl says, quietly, "It's not gonna be much, but it might dull it a little -"

"No alcohol," Quackity says, quick and rough, and Karl just nods.

"Got it, Big Q," Karl says, and looks to Sapnap, "In my bag; there should be a med kit. I've got stuff for stitches."

Sapnap goes to turn, but George is already there, holding out the kit like a peace offering.

Impassive, the mask watches on.

"Thanks," Sapnap mumbles. There is something bubbling in his chest; he hates being angry at George, but he hates the realization that George didn't trust him enough to tell him about whatever the hell this XD is more right now.

The time for this rage is later, too, though. George is fine, alive, and so his priority right now has to

be Quackity.

"I'm sorry," Sapnap says, running a hand down Quackity's arm, and the pet name slips out without him really thinking about it, "I'm so sorry, angel. I'll be as quick as I can."

"Sapnap -" Quackity says his name, sounding nervous, "You.."

"It's just me." Sapnap lays a hand flat on Quackity's back, skin on skin, and Quackity flinches away and then presses back in the same second. "You can feel me, right? No one runs as hot as I do. It's just me. You trust me?"

Quacktiy hesitates and then nods.

"Good. Good." Sapnap exhales slowly. "If it hurts too much, just squeeze Karl's hands."

Karl laughs, once, and it sounds closer to a sob.

"Just squeeze my hands." Karl repeats, calm and soothing.

It's different from sewing holes in clothes, but not any more difficult, a fact that makes Sapnap's stomach churn. Stitches, normally, feel like sewing leather together, tough and needing a certain amount of force to work effectively. With Quackity's wings, the skin under the feathers feels as delicate as butterfly wings, soft and fragile. With each repetitive, careful motion, it gets a little easier. Rote learning and muscle memory take over, his focus solely on making sure the wound is as cleanly closed as it can possibly be. It means he doesn't have to think about the pained whimpers that Quackity lets out every so often, Karl's gentle murmuring of reassurance, or the paste from the enderchest that George hands him without a single word passing between them.

"Please, stop," Quackity at one point drops his face to Karl's hands and Sapnap sees him press Karl's knuckles to his forehead, but he doesn't flinch or move away hardly at all, just sitting still despite his pleas, "Please, sir, *please*, it hurts -"

"It's just me." Sapnap swallows the bile rising in his throat, "Q, angel, it's just me. I'm almost done."

Quackity just shudders, once, and goes back to being so very still.

There's sweat on Sapnap's brow and his hands don't shake but only from sheer will. Quackity is a pale, frozen mess of sweat and tense muscle. Karl hasn't blinked in what feels like hours, just staring at Quackity's wounds over his shoulder.

"Done." He says, tying a knot in the thread. He doesn't have to move away, George pulls one of Karl's daggers, carefully snips the thread from the needle. Sapnap carefully smears the whole wound with the paste, perhaps lathers too much on. Better safe than sorry; infection won't make treat this wound kindly.

Sapnap is exhausted. Karl is still whispering, a soft chorus of "You did so good, you did so well Q, you're okay, you're safe, you're so good, baby," brushing Quackity's cheeks dry. Quackity slumps forward, allowing himself to be bracketed by Karl, who wraps gentle arms around him, as tight as he thinks Quackity can bear. He's all cried out, but that doesn't stop his shoulders shaking as Karl holds him, or his wings shivering in the cool air of early evening.

"Sapnap?" Karl calls out and Sapnap is there in a moment.

"His...his wings, Sap," Karl says, "We should get them clean, straighten them out -"

“Don’t fuckin’ talk about me like I’m not here,” Quackity mumbles from Karl’s shoulder.

Karl winces, “Sorry. It’s just... they look a bit like shit, Big Q. We can clean them up for you, make you more comfortable -”

“No,” Quackity says, shortly, “I’ll... I’ll sort them out myself, later. Nothing I’m not used to, anyway. Just don’t touch them anymore. *Please.*”

His wings are still blood-soaked, feathers in a mess, and it won’t be painless for Quackity to do it by himself, especially once the blood dries. Sapnap wants nothing more than to clean them, to run his fingers through the soft feathers until each is in its proper place, wipe away all trace of injury.

He can’t, though. Wings aren’t just an appendage to an avian, they’re something instinctual, deep-rooted. To be selfish enough to try and assuage his own fears by touching Quackity more than he’s comfortable with...Sapnap has been the bad guy before but not like that, and he won’t start now, even if all he wants to do is help. Cold fury runs through him again as he glances at the wings, at the years of abuse they’ve suffered.

When he makes eye contact with Karl, he knows that the other must have been having the same thought process as him; they won’t be like the asshole who did that, whoever *he* is.

“Okay,” Karl says, “We won’t touch them, baby.”

There’s an echo of suspicion in Quackity’s eyes, like he can’t quite believe them. Exhaustion clearly drags at him, and Sapnap reaches for the closest soft thing within reach.

With infinite care not to jostle the injured wing, he drapes Karl’s cloak over the both of them. Quackity’s head drops back onto Karl’s shoulder, one hand coming up to drag the rim of his beanie down over his face. Sapnap sits back on his heels, sighs into his hands.

Fucked. This is absolutely *fucked*.

George, who had returned to the side of the mysterious XD once Sapnap had done with the stitches, makes a motion with his hands; *stay here*, but he dithers by Sapnap, clearly at a loss now there is no emergency to attend to. The confident, determined, royal George that had ordered him not to put himself in danger so they could escape had gone. All that was left was just George; his best friend, twisting his hands and glancing anxiously between them and their mysterious savior.

Sapnap’s rage is all twisted up with nowhere to go, but he doesn’t want another fight with his best friend. Not when Quackity nearly died; not when he has so many unanswered questions.

“Explain,” Sapnap says, his voice tired but biting, “Now. Who the *fuck* is that?”

“Uh.” George rocks on his feet nervously, “Let’s...can I talk to you in private? Sapnap?”

Sapnap - is torn. He wants, very badly, to hear what explanation George is gonna give him. But he also doesn’t want to leave Quackity and Karl alone, especially not with as out of it as Quackity is.

But it seems safe, for now. Night is falling heavily, though. He’ll set up the tent, get Karl and Quackity settled as best he can, and then...

“Camp, first.” He decides, “Then, yes.”

George looks torn, but he doesn’t argue. “I’ll start the fire.”

Sapnap doesn't answer. He starts to stand, pulls slowly away from Quackity so Karl – who is starting to look a little dazed, like the shock is settling in – can take his whole weight.

"W-wait -" Quackity's arm shoots out suddenly, grabbing hold of Sapnap's hand so tight for a moment he's worried it might bruise. His palms are clammy, burning hot.

"Please," He says, hoarsely, "Please don't -"

"I won't," Sapnap says, mouth dry. He doesn't even know what Quackity is asking yet, but - "I promise, Q."

"D-don't go far." Quackity finishes, "It gets cold, hotstuff."

That forces a laugh out of Karl, honking and raspy, "The jungle does get chilly. I think we should all sleep together tonight. For warmth, you know. Maybe we should all be shirtless, for warming purposes."

"Prime. You don't ever quit, do you?" Sapnap shakes his head, a smile spreading across his face for the first time since they arrived here, and he squeezes Quackity's fingers gently. "I won't go far. You'll see me the whole time."

Quackity reluctantly lets go of his wrist and Sapnap steps away with what feels like the last remnants of his strength. He sets up the tent and their beds quickly. When he glances over to check on George, he's wandered out of the little area they manifested in - usually, Sapnap would call for him to come back, tell him he's too far away.

Sapnap doesn't. XD hovers at George's shoulder, his floating cloak nearly obscuring him from Sapnap's view. Sapnap assumes George is safe, for the moment.

"Come on," he returns once he's got the tent up and beds set inside, "You both need to rest. Can you stand, Q?"

"Yes." Quackity says and lets Sapnap help him stand up on shaky, weak legs. Sapnap takes most of his weight, a careful arm around his waist. Quackity holds his wings uncomfortably high to avoid touching Sapnap with them.

"I don't need rest. I haven't done shit," Karl blinks up at him. His pupils are blown wide, eyes shining, "I am perfectly fine."

"Sure you are," Sapnap nods and holds out his free hand, "Come keep Q company, then."

Karl stares at his hand and takes a few seconds to reach up and grab it. He lets Sapnap pull him up and Sapnap loops his free arm around him, too. Karl's in shock, Sapnap can see it plainly, and he needs to get them both somewhere warm and safe and comfortable before he crashes.

The three of them teeter-totter their way to the tent and Sapnap gets them both sitting on the edge of his bed.

"I'm keeping watch." he says as factually as he can, not an option, "I think you two need to sleep."

"I can -"

"Keep Q company." Sapnap interrupts Karl, "You were both right. The jungle is freezing at night, you'll need to stay together for warmth. No wonder you're so fuckin' cold all the time, I bet you retain heat for shit."

"You should stay, too, then." Quackity mutters, shifting on the bed and then wincing, "For warmth."

"George will be taking second shift." Sapnap says without bothering to check because George *will* be taking second shift. "I'll come check in when he takes over."

"We'll wait." Karl says with what Sapnap thinks was supposed to be a blink but was actually just him closing both eyes very intensely.

"Okay." He says, fully aware that they're both about to pass out. "I'm going to take your shoes off so the dirt doesn't join all the blood on my bed."

"Haha, your bed's fucking disgusting." Quackity wrinkles his nose up at him. Sapnap fights back a smile as he kneels at their feet. Quackity is covered in blood and broken feathers. He is not cute right now. He isn't.

"Haha, you're both going to scrub it down the second we find a river." he responds back as he unlaces Quackity's boots, and then Karl's. Rote, repetitive motions, same as the stitches. Even with the reminder, the simple act calms him. He doesn't have to worry about George, or XD, or even the gazes of the two people in front of him. He works out the knots, and carefully pulls each shoe away from its owner.

He sets both pairs by the end of the bed and stands, brushing his knees off. They both watch him, Quackity with a half-open, burning stare as he fights sleep, Karl with dull, tired blinks.

"Rest." Sapnap presses them both down by a shoulder each and they fall into each other naturally, as they do every night that they sleep together. Karl curls around Quackity like they fit together by design and Quackity sighs into Karl's neck. They've laid on top of Karl's cloak this time and Sapnap doesn't want to fight them on it so he swings his own off, drapes it over the two of them like a blanket. He doubts it brings the same level of comfort as Karl's does, but he hopes it's warm after so long on his body.

He waits until Karl's shoulders rise up and down steadily and Quackity is snoring before he leaves the tent.

George has set up a meticulous fire pit. Every piece of wood has been placed, every stone in order, tinder at the ready and the flames stoked to full bloom. He's placed torches around the perimeter and there's meat slowly roasting over the fire, which George is watching with an intensity the likes of which he usually reserves only for taking particularly difficult shots.

XD is standing over him, perhaps watching him as he rotates the spit. Sapnap can't really tell, with that ever-present mask in place.

Sapnap goes to the fire and sits across from George and XD, too tired to even bother glaring at the fucking stranger standing in the middle of his camp with his best friend.

"Okay." Sapnap takes a deep breath, lets it out. He tries to let go of all of the frustration, anger, fear, tries to just - empty his chest out. It's hard to breathe around all the bullshit happening in his head, but he wants to think straight for this.

"Here." George offers a warmed piece of pork. Sapnap accepts it but doesn't eat.

"Explain." He says instead.

"You should eat." George clears his throat, "A lot's happened, you know, and -"

“George.” Sapnap sets the pork down by the fire, leaving it to roast longer. He wants something charred tonight, but he’ll settle for it being his meal. “Explain.”

“Well...” George turns to look at XD and then comes back to Sapnap, face twisting nervously. Sapnap likes to think he doesn’t know anyone in the world half as well as he knows George. He can’t read him right now, though. Has no idea what the fuck is about to come out of his mouth.

“This is XD.”

“Okay.” Sapnap nods, “What the fuck is he?”

“Well...” George clears his throat, “I mean. He could be a lot of things. I dunno. Ask him what he is.”

“I’m not asking him.” Sapnap says patiently, “I’m asking you. Tell me what he is.”

“I don’t *know* what he is, Sapnap.”

“I am -”

“Shut up.” Sapnap raises a hand, cutting XD’s echoing voice off, “Shut the fuck up. This doesn’t involve you. This is about you, but it does *not* involve you. George. Answer the damn question. What is he?”

“He’s...” George looks at the fire, “Don’t get mad.”

“I’m not promising that.”

“Sap,”

“George.”

“He’s a protector!” George blurts out, “He’s *my* protector!”

“No.” Sapnap points at himself. “*I’m* your protector.”

“He’s *literally* my protector, Sapnap.” George pulls a face, “He’s...okay, here’s the part where you try not to get mad. He’s, sort of, maybe, I dunno, connected to - to the throne -”

“*What!?*”

Sapnap’s drawn Nightmare before he even fully stands. There’s a blur of cloak, a scattering of stone as the fire is impacted by the rush of air. Nightmare nearly flies from his hand but he tightens his grip and shoves against the air, jabs through the force of it until the blade comes into contact with something solid. He blinks his eyes open against the whirling, dirty hair and sees XD in front of him. His cloak is flying, still obscuring his entire body but spread out like a particularly threatened bird. He’s wielding a wooden sword, the whole of it pulsing a soft, enchanted purple.

“Sapnap! XD, *stop*, don’t you dare hurt him!”

“Get behind me, George.” Sapnap grits, leaning more weight into Nightmare to try to push XD back.

“Stop it, both of you!” George pushes between them, “Stop, I’ll throw myself on those swords, don’t think I won’t!”

“Stay back, George.” XD says, his voice shaking the world like a creeper’s detonation, “**He’ll hurt you.**”

“Me!?” Sapnap gives up on out-muscling XD and shifts his weight, twisting suddenly out of their deadlock and grabbing George’s wrist in the same move. He drags George away, ignoring the flailing, clumsy stumbles that George follows with and shoves him toward the tent. “*You’re* the one that’s going to hurt him! Is that your game, mask man!? You want to drag him back to the castle? Over my dead fuckin’ body, asshole!”

“George has a duty he has to fulfill.” XD draws himself up to his full height, well over six feet, and lifts his wooden sword in a stance that perfectly mirrors Sapnap’s. **“He must return.”**

“Over,” Sapnap repeats, “my dead fuckin’ body.”

“I said,” George booms, “*stop fighting!* XD, back off!”

Sapnap watches suspiciously as XD hesitates and then drops totally out of his stance, lowering his sword. He mimes as if he were sheathing it and Sapnap sees it *disappear into the air* as he does so.

“What the *fuck*.”

“XD,” George comes out from behind Sapnap, slowly inserting himself between the two of them, “is connected to the throne. But he wants to keep me safe. He’s been keeping me safe, too, Sap. He’s been following us for forever now.”

“No, he hasn’t.” Sapnap feels his skin start to heat up. Nightmare is bitterly cold in his grasp. “No, he hasn’t. I would have noticed. I would have noticed if he had.”

“He’s a demigod, Sap.” George gives him a soft look, “If he didn’t want you to notice, you wouldn’t have. And he didn’t, so you didn’t.”

“No.” Sapnap shakes his head, “No way. That can’t - that isn’t - how long? How fucking long, dude?”

“I...” George looks at the ground, “Weeks before we found Karl and Quackity. That’s when he showed himself to me.”

“That - that’s nearly two *months*!?” Sapnap shouts, voice cracking and dying at the end of the word, “He’s been following us for *two months*!? Where the fuck has he been then, since then!? Where was he during the fight where Quackity almost *lost a wing*!?”

“He didn’t want to reveal himself.” George draws his hands together, fingers interlocking nervously, “I...I told him to stay hidden. I didn’t want him to freak you out.”

“Freak me *out*!? George, you have a leashed demigod and you didn’t think to *mention it*!?”

“He’s *new*!” George explodes right back, “And he’s a little odd, and he’s connected to the throne so I knew you’d hate him and he’s not very good at being very nice! So we’ve been, you know, working on that! I was *going* to introduce you, when he knew dragging people to eternal damnation wasn’t a joke, and -”

“I’ve improved a lot since George agreed to be my best friend.” XD speaks up.

The words make Sapnap go so hot he’s pretty sure he’s starting to glow.

“What!?”

“Okay, okay,” George puts his hands up, palms out, “This is getting out of hand.”

“Listen the fuck up, you floating, faceless *fuck*,” Sapnap steps past George, drops Nightmare to the ground and fists XD’s cloak in both hands. He hears the fabric start to sear under his touch and hopes that whatever flesh under the cloak feels it. “That throne took *my* best friend. It almost took George, *too*. George is *not* your friend. George doesn’t have anything to do with that throne. He escaped that over-fucking-hyped chair and he’s not fucking going back. Do you hear me? Are you getting what I’m saying?”

“Sapnap, let him *go* -”

“Shut *up*, George!” Sapnap shoves XD back and XD actually goes. There’s another clatter as XD trips over the rocks, stumbles over the fire, ends up in a heap of jungle-green cloak and mask on the ground. He whirls around, takes a step back when he sees how close George is, “God, you - you! You selfish -”

“Hey!”

“Shut up!” Sapnap spits, “Shut up, shut up, don’t! Don’t say another fucking word to me! I can’t even put it into words! Is that where you’ve been sneaking off to when you’re supposed to be keeping watch!? You’ve been lying to me for *two months!*”

“Only by omission,” George says, but his voice is weak.

Sapnap doesn’t know what to *do*. He’s - he’s been mad at George before, but not like this. Not even him disappearing in the mountain made him feel like this - empty, and stupid, and -

And -

He wants Dream. He wants Dream to be here *so* fucking bad. Dream always knew how to handle them both, knew how to cut the tension, how to smooth raised hackles when George was too good at poking and Sapnap was too good at taking the bait. Dream always had a plan. Dream always knew when to laugh at himself or them, when to make a joke, when to be serious. Even when Dream didn’t know what to do, he did. Sapnap doesn’t know what to do right now except yell, but yelling won’t get him what he wants. Yelling won’t make George understand why what he did was wrong. Yelling won’t make Quackity not hurt anymore, and yelling won’t make Quackity getting hurt in the first place not Sapnap’s fault. Because he’d been worried about George, always worried about George, always watching him while he did reckless, stupid, foolish shit, because he and George only had each other now, without Dream.

Except George wasn’t alone, apparently. Not like Sapnap has been. George has been - been cultivating some sort of friendship with a *demigod connected to the throne*, that fucking throne, the reason for the coup, the reason Sapnap had to flee with his unconscious best friend and leave his other best friend behind, missing and hurt or missing and dead or - or -

Except George hasn’t been alone. Hasn’t felt as trapped and scared and useless and stupid and weak as Sapnap, because he’s had XD. Some all-powerful, green-cloaked godling.

“Sapnap, please, y-you’re steaming.”

The tears are steaming up so fast they barely have a chance to form before little wisps of white drift up from his eyes.

“I’m sorry.” George takes another step toward him but Sapnap steps back, keeping the space between them, “Sapnap, Pandas, I’m -”

“Don’t call me that right now.” Sapnap’s voice cracks again, “Don’t. Don’t call me that. I’ve been worried sick. I’ve been worried *sick* about you. Worried you’d stumble around in the dark and get blown up or fall down some ravine or get captured. Worried I’d fucking lose you while I was *sleeping*, George, I was too scared to *sleep!* But you were just running around with a whole-ass *demigod!*?!”

“I know,” George lurches forward and then steps back again, respecting Sapnap’s need for space, “I know, Sapnap, I know. I’m sorry. I just - XD, h-he was helpful and nice and he promised he’d step in, if things got dicey, he promised he’d protect you if anyone got too close, and I just - I’ve been worried, too, about you. I know you don’t sleep, and I know it’s because of me, and I know you -”

“You *don’t know!*” Sapnap covers his face with his hands, rocking forward on his toes and then back on his heels to exert some of the energy, “You don’t know.”

“...you’re right.” George admits, “I don’t know. I was selfish, you’re right. I was stupid, I wasn’t thinking. I was caught up in just avoiding upsetting you so you wouldn’t stress out more than I just stressed you out even worse than if I’d come clean.”

“I am trying,” Sapnap breathes out, “so hard to protect you. To make sure you’re safe.”

“Because you’re a good knight, Sap.” George smiles, small and sincere, “And an even better friend. My best friend. You’ve been doing it all alone. I’m a full-time job.”

“A two-person job.” Sapnap says weakly.

“You’re right.” George admits, the first time he’s acknowledged that someone is *missing* from the space between them since the fucking coup. “You’re right. But you don’t have to do it alone anymore. We have Karl and Quackity. They’re our friends. And...and we have XD.”

“He isn’t safe.” Sapnap shakes his head, “He isn’t *safe* if he’s connected to the throne.”

“XD.” George breaks their eye contact to find XD, who has been sitting on the ground and watching them since he fell, “You want me to go back to the throne, right?”

“You have a duty to return.”

“But I don’t want to go back. You won’t force me, right?”

“Correct.”

“Why?” George shifts on his feet again, “Why won’t you force me back? After all this time, you could have taken me against my will and I’d have been back on the throne forever ago.”

XD doesn’t answer for a long moment.

“Well?” Sapnap grits out.

“I just want you to be happy, George.” XD says, the power in his voice dimmed to something gentle. **“I always want you to be happy, George.”**

“And I’m happy here.” George smiles wider, “*Not* on the throne.”

“For now.” XD nods, like that answers every question someone might need to know the answer to.

“That...isn’t reassuring.” Sapnap runs a hand through his hair. His fingers catch on knots. He needs to cut it soon.

“Just...” George hesitates, “Can I come closer now?”

Sapnap checks his body temperature and shrugs. “Don’t touch me.”

George nods, takes a few steps until they’re close enough that they *could* touch, if they wanted to. If Sapnap’s skin wouldn’t have blistered George’s on impact.

“XD wants to keep me safe.” George lowers his voice, “And you want the same thing. I’m not asking you to like him. He...doesn’t really understand what that means, anyway. He doesn’t understand...well. Human things. Not much. But if he’s here, you don’t have to worry about everything as much. He’s a skilled fighter. He’s strong. He’s smart. He could help us.”

“No.”

“He already has,” George insists, “The... The cave, Sapnap. I heard you and Karl talking and I knew I could help, that he could help. And he did, Sapnap. He kept me safe from the storm and he gave me food for all of us.”

“In return for what?” Sapnap narrows his eyes.

“Nothing.”

“*Bullshit.*”

“He tried to persuade me back to the castle, but that’s it. He wouldn’t force me, he didn’t want to make a deal even when he could. You heard him, he just wants me to be happy. And I’m happy when you’re all safe. He saved all of us, twice, because of that, because he *promised* to come when we needed help. You don’t need to do this all alone, Sapnap.”

“I don’t fucking trust him,” Sapnap growls

“Listen.” George shoves his hands in his pockets. “Sapnap, please. You don’t have to trust him, or like him or anything more than just tolerate him. But you’re running yourself into the ground when you don’t have to. XD...he hurt himself, moving us all like that. I was talking to him earlier and he says he used a lot of juice, that it’s going to take some time to recover. He’s gonna need to heal up, and that means he’s gonna need to stay close to me.”

“*What!?*”

“Just think about it.” George shakes his head, “It’s been an awful, long day. A lot of stuff has happened. You’re tired. I’m tired. Karl and Quackity are - well.” George motions at the tent behind him. “Let me take first watch, okay? We’ll clean up camp,” which has been half-ruined, a number of the torches blown out by Sapnap and XD’s clash, the fire ruined, Sapnap’s burnt porkchop used as fuel.

Sapnap narrows his eyes.

“I won’t leave.” George promises, “I swear. XD will stay right here in camp. I won’t leave. Please, just get some sleep. Just a little. You’re exhausted, Sapnap.”

“Don’t.” Sapnap clenches his fists together, but all the fighting has left him wrung out. The hem of his shirt is smoking, the scent of burnt linen rising. “Don’t tell me what I am.”

“Okay, then I’ll tell you what I see.” George frowns at him. “I see a tired, beat-up man who needs to *rest*. Please, Sapnap, for me.”

“That doesn’t work on me.” Sapnap sneers, but he feels himself softening. He watches George look around for a moment and then crouch a few feet away to pick up Nightmare.

“Rest.” George looks Nightmare over with dark eyes, his forehead pinching for a moment before smoothing out. He uses the edge of his cloak to polish the blade off at the base. When he offers the sword, he’s careful to point it tip down.

Sapnap takes it by the blade, carefully. The hilt is warm to the touch when he grabs it to sheath back at his side.

“A few hours.” He agrees. “Only a few hours. First watch. You’ll wake me for second.”

“I will.” George lifts a hand, pinky out. “I swear.”

“I’m too hot to do that.” Sapnap scoffs, but he carefully smacks their covered wrists together, pinky held out, too. They did it as kids, when Sapnap used to *always* run too hot. It’s been a long time since they made this kind of promise.

“Don’t let Karl hear you say that.” George cackles, only laughing more when Sapnap shoulder checks him - carefully - as he passes by. It’s only slightly forced laughter, but it’s better than the frosty silence of the cave. A sign that maybe, things might still turn out okay.

“Fuck you. Fuck you. Fuck you.” Sapnap chants on his way to the tent, “I want fucking food when I wake up. I want food, George. And a clean camp. And a good fire.”

“Yes, Sapnap. You’ll get all of that.”

“I’m not accepting your apology and he isn’t coming with us.”

“Okay, Sapnap.”

“I fuckin’ mean it.”

“I know, Sapnap.”

“God, you’re so fucking annoying.” Sapnap sneers at him, with no real heat behind it, and then ducks into the tent.

Two pairs of eyes peer at him, the dim light of the torches peeking through making them glossy and reflective in the dark.

“*Gods!*” Sapnap jumps, “Why the fuck are you two awake!?”

“Yelling.” Quackity blinks slowly.

“Oh. Sorry.”

“S okay.” Karl stretches, voice slurred, “Come to bed.”

“Don’t say it like that.” Sapnap wrinkles his nose, but he still sits on George’s bed and pulls his

boots off. He hesitates, then pulls his shirt off, too. It's disgusting, a mix of Quackity and Butler's blood, sweat, the grit and grime he picked up from being on the ground in both a town and the jungle. It's stiff and uncomfortable. The bottom hem is now charred. He'll wash it in the morning after they find a water source.

His muscles ache, nearly as bad as his heart does. He can't stop thinking about Tommy saying Dream's name. It's the first time he's heard it from someone that wasn't his own thoughts in so fucking long. George just avoids talking about him, just lets Sapnap sit in the memories and silence and mourn all alone and Sapnap doesn't blame him for that, but it's *hard*. George lost a lover, but Sapnap lost Dream *too*, lost his partner in all aspects but for the one that George had him, instead. Sapnap's been going through the world one-handed since he lost Dream. It's a relief but it also brings him a sort of pain he can't put into words. No words, except that he misses his best friend like he missed the sun during those rainy days.

"Sapnap." Karl calls, voice soft, and he turns his head to see them both watching him.

He hums in response.

"m cold." Karl yawns. "Come here."

"I'll literally boil you alive right now, Karl."

"No you won't." Karl seems to fall asleep in the middle of speaking and then wake up at the end through sheer force of will.

"The bed's not big enough for all three of us." Sapnap smiles into the dark.

"You and Q are tiny." Karl reaches over Quackity's body and motions, "Come here, I'm cold."

"We'll squish Quackity."

"Sapnap." Quackity creeps a hand out from under his cloak, just the top half of his fingers peeking out to beckon, "It's cold."

"Fuck's sake." Sapnap sighs and heaves himself up. "Don't either of you complain when you wake up sweating."

"Our own hot water bottle." Karl says dreamily. "Get in the middle, okay?"

"You'll have to switch places," Sapnap warns, "I don't want Q to get pushed out onto his wing."

"Fine, fine," Karl agrees and then rolls over Quackity, who just exhales hard but wiggles into Karl's left-behind spot. Sapnap looks them over critically as Karl gathers Sapnap's cloak up so it's out of the way. Quackity has removed his ripped shirt, too, and Karl must have removed his so they could be skin to skin and conserve heat. Sapnap forces himself to cool down to a level appropriate for human touch, despite the turmoil still in his stomach. At a more normal temperature, he realizes that he didn't notice before but the air is prickling at even him. The temperature must have dropped steadily since the sun went down into a damp coolness.

Despite the chill and the blood and the bruises, they paint a good picture, shirtless and laying together, sleep-soft and demanding he take the room they made for him between them. Quackity shivers in the chill, vulnerable wings loose, and Karl sits so comfortably in his body, so sure in his welcome, that it makes Sapnap a little nervous.

"Hurry up." Karl grumbles, "Stop staring, you're not an unwedded maiden. You literally practice

swords in your underwear.”

“Please don’t call my training ‘practicing swords’.” Sapnap sighs, and then carefully climbs into the bed. Almost immediately he’s being pinched and prodded into position by two sets of hands. Quackity’s touches are light and cautious, testing, while Karl’s are demanding and pushy. Sapnap lets both happen until he’s lying flat on his back, staring at the inclined roof of the tent with a body on either side of him. Quackity’s on his stomach, their sides overlapping so he can keep his wings slightly extended. It’s so small, the tips of his longest feathers barely brushing past his arms and tickling Sapnap’s chest. Karl curls right up like he belongs, head of fluffy hair practically in Sapnap’s mouth if he so much as twitches his face in Karl’s position. He can feel both of their heartbeats. Karl’s spread his cloak out over the three of them and it only barely fits so they’ve both crushed up against him. He’s had to curl an arm around them both so that neither fall off. The bed is too small, this will quickly grow uncomfortable for all of them, Sapnap most of all.

He holds them closer.

“You smell like burning and fighting.” Karl sniffles loudly, “Bath tomorrow, methinks.”

“There’s a whole free bed, right there, stink-free.” Sapnap points out tiredly, but his lips are twitching.

“Shh.” Quackity pats his face and then Karl’s. “Sleeping. Shh.”

“Shh.” Sapnap agrees and lets his eyes close.

The three of them are silent. Sapnap can hear shuffling outside, George’s soft voice and the rumblings of a voice at once familiar and different. He strains to pick up the now-soft lilt of XD’s voice, but then he feels Quackity shift awkwardly and his attention snaps to him.

“Okay? Uncomfortable? Too warm?”

“Yes, no, no.” Quackity replies, quickly.

“What’s wrong?” Karl chimes in, lifting his head from Sapnap’s shoulder, “Is our water bottle too ripped? The muscles too distressingly firm to fall asleep on? I’m having that problem, too.”

“Karl!”

“Stop mother henning me!” Quackity complains, “I’m just itchy, fuck!”

“Don’t itch.” Sapnap and Karl say at the same time, and then clamp their mouths shut at Quackity’s scathing glare.

“No shit, don’t itch.” Quackity rolls his eyes and carefully sits up just enough to shake his wings out. A single feather falls to Sapnap’s chest and Quackity picks it up, looks it over, tosses it to the floor.

“Hey! Don’t throw those away!”

“It was broken! And mine!”

“Still!”

“I thought we were shh’ing.” Sapnap says, unable to tear his eyes from the way one wing stretches easily, if still droopy from lack of use, and the other stays limp and sad.

“We are.” Karl lowers his voice. Quackity just snickers, carefully folds his wings back up and lays back down. This time, he rests his head on Sapnap’s chest, above his head. Sapnap readjusts his arm, trying his best to both keep him from falling off and not touching his wings unnecessarily.

Karl tilts his head up, looks at Sapnap’s face seriously despite the sleep still fighting for control.

“Okay?”

“You’re comfortable?” Quackity chimes in, looking up, too. How is Sapnap supposed to make words happen when he’s got them both looking at him like that? Trusting and sleepy and comfortable?

Sapnap feels his face heat up. “I’m fine. Go to sleep. Seriously, you both need to be resting.”

“Says the guy who got into a legit brawl earlier.” Karl scoffs, but they do settle. This time, Sapnap closes his eyes and just listens to them breathing. It’s much more relaxing than attempting to figure out what the fuck is going on in the camp outside.

Quackity snores. Sapnap noticed a long time ago, at least the week previous. It isn’t loud - just a soft, gentle, steady snore. Karl breathes deep when he sleeps, his whole chest moving like he’s simply enjoying the act of breathing while unconscious. Sapnap listens to both of them long after he’s sure they’ve slept.

Even if he wanted to, he couldn’t resist the draw of rest while buried under the two of them. He sleeps and it’s the best sleep he’s had in months, despite his arms numbing before he’s even out.

“Sapnap.” George whispers and Sapnap wakes immediately. He snaps his eyes open, turns his head, gets a faceful of brown curls with the image of George just visible through all of them.

George is smirking.

Sapnap takes a second to wake up, once his brain registers that there is no danger. Both of his arms are numb and tingly. He’s so hot he’s sweating, his shoulders especially slick with it. Two people are sleeping to either side of him, Quackity still snoring quietly and Karl deep breathing.

Quackity’s wings have spread out in his sleep and one is splayed over his arm, the fragile bone and gently moving feathers tickling lightly at his exposed skin. Karl’s somehow managed to lay almost entirely on top of Sapnap, nose firmly planted under Sapnap’s jaw.

Sapnap blinks at George, and then the ceiling.

“Fuck.” he says, voice rough.

“Fuck.” George agrees, voice a whisper. “I can take second watch, too.”

“No.” Sapnap shakes his head slightly, not enough to dislodge Karl. Without thought, he drops his volume to match George’s. “No. Just, uh. Leave for a second. I need to somehow extricate myself from the clingiest fucking librarians you’ll ever meet.”

“Oh, they keep a healthy distance between us. Seems to be just a *you* thing!”

“George.” Sapnap is not in the mood for teasing. George doesn’t seem to get the memo.

“Maybe because *I* don’t practice my swordplay shirtless -”

“*George!*” he hisses.

“I’m going, I’m going.” George winks, “I saw the clothes on the floor. Don’t have to tell me not to look at sensitive places.”

“Get out!” He whisper-shouts.

George gets out.

Sapnap grits his teeth, tilting his head back to watch him go.

“Five more minutes...” Karl snuffles, voice thick with sleep.

“Gotta get up, Karl.” Sapnap carefully unwraps his arm from Karl’s waist, where he’s been holding him in place while they slept. Karl just grumbles again and Sapnap sees how his grasp on Quackity’s hip tightens as he starts to wake up.

“Why?” Karl whines, “‘s not second watch already.”

“It is.” Sapnap says with a smile. Karl’s cute when he’s just waking up. It’s always when his eyes are darkest, clouded with sleep and annoyance. Karl doesn’t wake up easy like Sapnap and Quackity do.

“No.” Karl drops his head back down, hiding his face. “Make George do it.”

“George has to sleep, too.” Sapnap points out. “Come on, darlin’, get off.”

“*Darling*, you say?” And suddenly Karl is awake, eyes wide and pure-iron gray. “Oh, I like that.”

“Of course you do.” Sapnap says and it isn’t meant to sound as fond as it comes out.

“I like affection. Sue me.” Karl sniffs, “Say it again and I might listen.”

“Karl.”

“Karl? Who is Karl? I don’t know a Karl.”

“Prime.” Sapnap rolls his eyes. “Darling, dearest, beloved, please get the fuck off me so I can go make sure zombies don’t attack us while we sleep.”

“Who am I to get in the way of your duty?” Karl says with a put-upon weep to his voice and sits up. He stands first, slipping out from under the cloak and stretching out as best he can in the tent. Sapnap resolutely keeps his eyes off all the bared skin. He’s *respectful*.

Quackity must sense the shift in the bed because he starts to sigh and wiggle, his beanie nearly off his head from how intensely he’d been rubbing his face into Sapnap’s chest during the night. As best he can, Sapnap pulls it back into place. He tries to slip out from under Quackity without waking him up, wanting to make sure he sleeps as much as possible, but between one moment and the next, Quackity is as awake as he and Karl, if still a little dazed.

“What.” He mumbles thickly. “Stop.”

“Sorry.” Sapnap can’t stop the grin. “I didn’t mean to wake you up. I have to get up.”

“No.” Quackity drops his face in a perfect parallel to Karl’s response, “*Warm*, Sapnap.”

“I’m sorry.” Sapnap says and finds that he means it. “Karl will get back in bed with you.”

“Or we could move out there.” Karl offers.

“Why the fuck would you sleep out there?” Sapnap can’t help but chuckle, taking the opportunity to gently nudge Quackity off of him and stand up, too. Karl is not nearly as polite as Sapnap was, blatantly checking him out as he stretches. Sapnap stubbornly pretends that he isn’t preening about it.

“I’m done sleeping.” Quackity says around a yawn.

“Like hell you are.”

“Mind your fuckin’ business, Sapitus Napitus. Karl, hand me my shirt.” Quackity makes grabby hands instead of sitting up like Sapnap and Karl. Karl does it without hesitation, snapping the shirt out a few times to remove any settled dust. It doesn’t do much, the whole thing stained with sweat and blood as his and Sapnap’s are. They all pull on their shirts and refasten their cloaks, Quackity more clumsily than usual as he sits on the bed and carefully works his wings through the new holes in his shirt. The wounded one won’t be able to be strapped down. They’ll have to mend his shirts so he can wear them with his wings properly.

“Just go back to sleep.” Sapnap tries one more time. Karl just hushes him and helps Quackity out of the bed. Sapnap gives up, throwing his hands up and walking out of the tent to find XD standing close to the mouth, George practically asleep where he’s standing and leaning against his chest. XD has an arm at his hip as if to draw at a moment’s notice, another around George’s waist to keep him upright and steady.

It’s a familiar image. Sapnap blinks once, sees blond hair and green eyes and a big smile, and then nothing. It’s just a stranger, touching his best friend with a familiarity he doesn’t deserve.

“Go to sleep, George.” Sapnap says quietly, if distantly, when George blinks his eyes open. George either doesn’t notice the coolness or is too tired to address it because he brushes past the three of them without a word, just tugging XD along. XD goes willingly, the glassy mask turning to face Sapnap before he disappears into the tent.

“Who is that?” Quackity blinks, “Did I just imagine a whole person? Or did I forget a whole person?”

“No, you didn’t forget a person.” Karl frowns, “Because then I’d have forgotten him and I definitely feel like I’d remember the guy who exploded us into a jungle.”

“Ah, that explains why the trees are different.”

“He’s a friend of George’s.” Sapnap decides to say with a scrunched nose. “Don’t go near him. Okay? He’s dangerous.”

“Okay.” Karl agrees immediately, “We’ll stay away.”

They won’t stay away. Sapnap knows they won’t stay away. XD is going to emerge come morning and the both of them are gonna be on him like magnets, desperate to satiate their curiosity.

“At least stay away when I’m not with you.” He isn’t above begging.

“*Sapnap*,” Karl exaggerates a frown at him, Quackity propped on his shoulder and yawning with his eyes closed, “You *said* not to go near him. We won’t.”

“I believe you.” He lies and goes to the fire. They both follow him despite the bed just sitting

empty in the tent, welcome and warm.

George did a good job cleaning up the camp. It's clean again, the torches lit and up around the perimeter and the fire back to perfection. He's even set up three and a half rations, the agreed-upon amount Sapnap would leave out instead of a full one.

"Hungry?" He asks as Karl and Quackity come to join him. Quackity plops down, shakes his shoulders out again and then shakes his head to match.

"Still itchy?" Karl accepts the offered dried pork and bites into it with pleasure.

Quackity nods.

"If you want..." Karl spots the enderchest and tosses it open, pulling out a waterskin and a fresh cloth, still clean from the laundry they did in the cave, "I can help get rid of the blood. No preening, no more wound care, I promise. Just cleaning up the blood."

Quackity casts him a suspicious look. "Karl..."

"I promise, baby. Just the blood. But if you say no, it's okay."

Sapnap keeps his mouth shut. He doesn't want to spook Quackity if he's actually giving the idea a chance.

Slowly, carefully, Quackity nods. "Fine. But you can't pull anything. Don't even move them unless you're wiping blood. Don't break any. Don't pluck any. Don't touch the skin with a bare hand. D-don't -"

"I won't." Karl says immediately, cutting in when Quackity's voice starts to quiver, "I won't. Sapnap will watch and stop me if I try to break a rule. Right, Sap?"

"Right." Sapnap nods. "Come here, lay on your stomach."

"Do I have to lay on my stomach?" Quackity asks softly and Sapnap is shaking his head before he even gets the sentence out.

"However you want to be, angel. Wanna sit? We can sit. It'll be easier if you're lying down but whatever you want is what we'll do."

Quackity creeps to the spot Sapnap pats like a fearful cat, slow, small movements. He hesitates when he sits down, looking between Sapnap and Karl with spooked eyes.

"You *swear* you'll stop?"

"Cross my heart." Karl crosses his finger over his heart, looking completely serious. "And Sapnap will make *double* sure that I stop if I don't react fast enough."

Quackity looks at Sapnap for reassurance and Sapnap hopes the sincerity is apparent when he nods back.

It must be enough because Quackity shifts around until he eventually ends up laying on his stomach, arms crossed under his head, wings splayed out and exposed. The tips of his fingers find Sapnap's and Sapnap tangles the digits together without hesitation.

"Ready?" Karl sits at Quackity's side, "Just tell me if you want to stop or if I hurt you."

"I will." Quackity mumbles into his arms and Sapnap watches Karl swipe a firm, kind hand down his back before he soaks the cloth in water and looks critically at the injured wing.

Sapnap isn't jealous. He isn't. He's just the tiniest bit unhappy that Karl is the one that Quackity will associate with careful and gentle touches on the most intimate parts of his self, while Sapnap had to play bad cop, listen to Quackity beg him to stop something he couldn't.

Okay. Maybe he's a little jealous. He bites down on the wave of fear that this inspires, because if he follows that spiral he might never breathe again, and that is not what he needs when Quackity is gripping his hands so tightly. Liking what they look like when he's got them in a bed with him is a much different thing to accept than being jealous that he isn't the one touching Quackity's wings.

Ever so gently, Karl drags the cloth down the worst of the stains. Quackity lets out a shuddering sigh, his eyes squeezed shut as his breath begins to pick up, shallow, bordering on panicked.

"Hey," Sapnap says, low and gentle, trying to mimic Karl from earlier, "Hey, Q, look at me, alright? Focus on me. My voice, my hands, okay? Quackity, look at me."

Quackity looks at him, matches their breaths. The haze that had descended over his eyes clears.

"Can't -" He shudders as Karl makes another pass down his wing, watery blood dripping off and down and onto the ground when Karl carefully pours water directly onto a dry spot to make it easier, "Can't look away, hotstuff."

"Keep a tight hold on those perfectly shaped and flexible fingers there, Q," Karl says, and Quackity huffs out a laugh. The tension slowly drains from his shoulders, though his vice-like grip remains on Sapnap's hands. He keeps looking at Sapnap.

"You're doing really well, Quackity," Sapnap says, quiet as Karl wrings out the cloth once again. A few feathers fall limp to the ground and Karl winces but Quackity doesn't seem to notice.

"You're doing so good for us."

"You don't have to treat me like a baby," Quackity mumbles, but his grip relaxes, no longer so white-knuckled, so Sapnap knows it helped. He runs his thumb over the back of Quackity's hands, and watches as his breathing evens out, falling into gentle snoring as Karl's motions get less and less intrusive, his itch soothed.

Karl twists out the cloth, right at Sapnap's feet. "That's the last of it," He says, and Sapnap frowns as he sits heavily at his side.

"Here," Sapnap says, "I've got to be free to move while on watch."

Together, they gently maneuver Quackity until his head is in Karl's lap, Karl combing his fingers through the dark hair that hangs loose from under the beanie. Sapnap stands, stretches, then makes a quick survey of the cleaned-up campsite. It's the middle of the night; there are the sounds of creatures far beyond the border of the torches, the chattering of crickets, the callings of parrots, but nothing to suggest danger. No low moans or rattling of bones. No fucking hissing.

"You okay?" He asks, once he's confident that nothing is going to trundle out of the forest and wreck their shit, "It's been a rough day."

"You could say that again," Karl says, and something in his voice sounds strangled, gives Sapnap pause.

"It can be... hard. To see people you thought you left behind," Sapnap says carefully. He wants

answers; why Karl would ever work with people like that in the first place, why he didn't tell them that he was a mercenary as a side-gig. Ice suddenly clogs his throat as he is struck by a horrible thought; is Karl going to leave, just like he clearly left Billiam's group without ever looking back? That, he understands, he half wanted to leave the castle every time he had to interact with nobility, too. But Karl hadn't said it was the elitism. He said it got too intense. Sapnap can't see anything about this mad-dash for the border being anything but intense, and as much as it brings an unwarranted lump to his throat, he couldn't blame them if they wanted to cut and run, after all of this.

So yeah, Sapnap wants answers, some answers to questions he doesn't want to admit he has.

What surprises him is that he wants Karl to be okay even more.

"You don't have to tell me," He says, poking at the fire as Karl stays conspicuously silent, "They were a bunch of assholes, anyway."

Sapnap turns, going to offer a reassuring smile, but that drops immediately. Karl is hunched over Quackity, fingers still tangled in the other's hair, and his shoulders are shaking so violently it's as if an invisible person has grabbed them and is tossing him roughly back and forth. He has a hand covering his eyes as Sapnap scrambles forwards, but as he gets closer, he can clearly see the tears streaming down Karl's face.

"Karl," He says, "Karl, what is it? Are you hurt?"

Karl shakes his head, shuddering with shaking sobs, and Sapnap feels completely helpless.

"Karl," He repeats, utterly wrongfooted, "Can you look at me?"

It takes a moment but Karl does, slowly lifting his head to show puffy eyes and cheeks smeared with saltwater.

Maybe some of Karl has rubbed off on him, because he reaches up, brushes a gentle thumb over Karl's cheek. He leans into the touch, tucking his chin and cheek into the palm of Sapnap's hand and sniffling. It's sad, Karl's characteristic grin nowhere to be found.

"I've got you," Sapnap says, "I've got you, Karl," and it's like something clicks in his head, all of it coming to a singular understanding of what has been building ever since the start of this shitty, horrible day, "You can let go for now, darlin'. You don't have to hold it together right now. I've got you."

A sob bubbles past Karl's lips, a choking noise stifled a second later. His eyes close, fresh tears flowing down his cheeks.

"I've got you," He says again, running a hand through that mop of brown hair, "He's safe, you're safe, nothing's gonna hurt any of us. I've got you."

Sapnap lets Karl rest his head on his chest as he breaks apart.

It's several long minutes of breathless, choking sobs, of soft reassurances whispered into humid-frizzy hair, warm palms on Karl's cheek, his shaking back.

It lasts until Karl pulls away and entangles their fingers together. Sapnap doesn't think he's ever held hands with anyone as much as he has with Karl in the last few days.

"I didn't know," Karl says, hoarsely, "I should have known, how could I not *know*?"

“It’s not your fault,” and those simple words threaten another wave of tears as Karl helplessly indicates Quackity’s wings, tucked loose to his body, still messy and unkempt but at least mostly clean, now.

“I still should have...” He trails off before he speaks again, “We haven’t traveled together long.” Karl says, blinking rapidly at Sapnap with red eyes and a rough voice, the first time he has ever sounded so very raw, “But every time something happens to him, I’m viscerally reminded that if I’d somehow found him sooner, maybe a moment of that pain wouldn’t have happened.”

He huffs, wiping his eyes with the back of his hand, “Sometimes, I wish I could time travel. If only to spare him this.”

“It’s happened before? The - when he...thinks he’s somewhere else?”

“It’s happened before.” Karl leans his entire weight on Sapnap, like he fully believes Sapnap will hold him up. Sapnap finds that he doesn’t want to disappoint. “It’s happened a couple times, for little moments, like when some people we traveled with were too rowdy and drunk, but like *that*, that intense, I’ve only seen once before. Some bandit tried to rob us and the fucker caught him in the ribs with a pretty hard hit. I chased him off but -”

Sapnap could picture it. The two of them alone in a forest or some other biome, with a single sword and some daggers Karl uses more for intimidation than for talent. Some bandit with a blunt sword, not sharp enough to pierce Quackity’s leather but a painful enough hit that it stole his breath, reminded him too much of some other kind of pain. Karl chasing the bandit off, only for Quackity to be curled over himself, trying to protect himself from someone that wasn’t there.

“He just - he was crying, and he kept promising to be *better*, he kept calling me *sir*, I -” Karl breaks into sniffles again, his voice raspy, and Sapnap just holds him until he’s cried himself out again.

“And you - I’m sorry.” Karl wipes his eyes using Sapnap’s shoulder, “I’m sorry, Sapnap. I thought you knew about me being a mercenary. But I guess I didn’t exactly make it obvious.”

“No,” Sapnap sighs, “No, you didn’t. But I’ve got bigger things to worry about than you being a merc.”

There’s a pregnant pause. Karl sniffs, wet and dragging, and Sapnap waits for him to speak.

“And I’m sorry that... I’m sorry that *that* was how you found out. Because of them.”

“Billiam’s crew.” Sapnap says. It is and isn’t a question all at the same time.

“It was a long time ago. At least a year.” Karl says, quiet. “And you heard what they said. I guess they all took it more seriously than I did.”

“They *were* a bunch of assholes,” Sapnap repeats his earlier sentiment, “I’m not surprised you left. Aristocrats are all like that.”

“Still,” Karl says, “I’m sorry. About Billiam and Butler and - they only came after you because of me. You didn’t have to do that. Help like that.”

“You didn’t have to help me in the cave, either.” Sapnap points out, “Quackity didn’t have to step in front of Billiam for me. Neither of you had to stay with us when XD did what he did. Shit happens, Karl. That’s what happens when you’re, like, friends, or whatever. You help.”

“Friends?” Karl’s cheeks are flush from the tears but Sapnap thinks he sees color flood them,

anyway, “Careful, Sapnap. Between ‘darling’ and ‘friends’, I’m gonna start to think you *like* me.”

Sapnap looks at the fire, flushing. “I do like you. You think I let anyone just drag me shirtless into bed?”

Karl laughs, squeaky. “I like you, too. And not only because you’re handsome.”

“Gee, thanks.” Sapnap flutters his eyelashes, just to make Karl laugh again.

Sapnap drops his eyes to Quackity, takes in his lax face and fluttering feathers, the way he’s made himself comfortable in Karl’s lap.

“I like him, too,” Sapnap admits. “I’m glad we ran into you two. Even if you’re annoying.”

“Aw,” Karl drops his voice, looks down at Quackity, too. He runs gentle fingers through his hair again and Quackity sighs, turns into the touch. “I’m...Sapnap, I...I mean, we...Quackity and I are...” He trails off and Sapnap lets him, doesn’t push. Karl will say what he wants to say.

“It’s okay, man,” Sapnap says after a moment, “That can be the end of all the mushy shit. It’s been a day.”

Karl sighs. “It’s not that. We’re... It’s complicated.”

Sapnap snorts, “An understatement. Everything is complicated right now. But we’ve got time to figure it out. Right?”

Will you stay? The unspoken question hangs in the air. Karl takes a breath, holds, releases it very deliberately.

“Right,” He says, shoulders curling in and leaning against Sapnap again. “We trust you,” Karl says softly, as if afraid the wind might steal his voice away. “I’ve made the decision.”

“Oh, good. Let Quackity know when he wakes up.” Sapnap gives in, drops his face into Karl’s hair and breathes in his scent. This is fine. This will be fine. Sapnap can handle this. “I think I’ve decided to trust you guys, too.”

“Yeah?” Karl looks at him. His eyes are grey like the smoke from the fire. Sapnap likes this color, too.

“Yeah.” Sapnap thinks about it. “I do. I’ve made the decision.”

Karl breathes out slowly, nods once.

The fire crackles. The three of them sit by the flames for a long time. There are no mobs close enough to be truly heard, so Sapnap lets himself be just a little distracted. Lets himself focus on Karl at his side and Quackity snoring gently, finally calm and comfortable after hours of itching and pain.

“So.” Karl breaks the quiet, never one to leave it for long, “The prince, huh?”

“Gods, don’t start.” Sapnap rolls his eyes, “I’m not gonna apologize for not telling you.”

“No,” Karl doesn’t rise to the bait like he usually would. He keeps his voice quiet. “You don’t need to. I saw what was at stake. I get it. I don’t think I understood, before, but I do now.”

Sapnap lets his shoulders relax. “He’s...he’s all I have left. I lost Dream, already. George won’t

even talk about him. He just pulls his migraine card and makes me shut up. He doesn't wanna even acknowledge him. But he was our best friend. We grew up with him. I barely remember a time that I wasn't with him."

"I'm sorry." Karl pulls away to look at him, eyes dark, "I'm so sorry, Sapnap."

Sapnap shrugs. "It isn't your fault."

"Still. I can't imagine."

"It's like..." Sapnap breathes out slowly, "Like my lungs are only taking in half as much oxygen as I need. Constantly. If I'd been the one that - if it had been me...If it had been me, George and Dream would have been okay. Dream always knew what to do, and George *listened* to him. Dream would have noticed XD. Dream wouldn't have needed to *change* so much. I miss who I used to be when I had him."

"Well." Karl frowns pointedly. "I'm glad that you're here. I'm glad that you made it. It sounds like you loved Dream a lot, but...but I'm glad. And I like who you are. Even when you act like someone has inserted a stick right -"

"*Karl!*"

Karl trails off, giggling. Sapnap can't look at him, doesn't want to meet his eyes. He pulls Karl back in, hides his face in his hair again. His stomach aches with all that he's feeling. Karl lets himself be held until Sapnap has collected himself enough to let go.

"So," Sapnap says awkwardly, all of the tension draining out of him and leaving him hollow, exhausted, but somehow in a nice way. Quackity snores between them, deep and comfortable.

"Mhm?"

"...Karl Jacobs, huh?"

"Sapnap?"

"Yeah?"

"Shut the fuck up."

Sapnap shuts the fuck up and does it with a smile.

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

call this a pizza because it's a lil slice of life... with a sprinkle of mystery! I hope you guys enjoy this chapter and as ever, we love hearing your thoughts and theories in the comments, and we appriciate every single one of you readers!

tw for this chapter // panic attacks (only at the start of the chapter, though!), grief/mourning.

Morning breaks like the first thaw of spring; creeping, then spilling over the tops of the trees in a wave of orange and pink. The air is languid, heady with sweat. Sometime during the night, Quackity ended up splayed out on top of Sapnap, Karl pacing around the campfire on his watch. It's a move that has George smirking when he emerges from the tent with a demigod in tow.

XD looks exactly the same as he did the night before. Utterly unruffled, gloved hands folded in front of him and his cape expanding and settling around his whole body. It's difficult to tell anatomy, what with the way that it falls, a green satin stream, but he's athletic. A fighter without his sword, and doesn't *that* make Sapnap uneasy. He has no way of knowing where an attack might come from.

He wakes Quackity with a gentle poke to the side, well away from his injuries. The fuzzy, sleepy look that Quackity gives him makes his stomach fizz and his cheeks warm. He bites his cheek and tries to remember how to breathe. It's just the transport, leftovers from the teleport. It's not how people are meant to travel. That's all. Last night's thought was just - a fleeting delusion. It can't be real.

Quackity grumbles, wings fluttering as Sapnap sits him up, lets him lean on Karl while he insists on making breakfast. George introduces XD to them, as Sapnap fiddles with eggs and dried pork. XD regards them both as one would a strange or exotic pet, and inclines his head in a manner that sends Sapnap dizzyingly back to lessons on manners and the proper address of nobles. George, completely oblivious, chatters away.

It's strange to watch Quackity's wings in the daylight, open and free. The one that is injured is still tucked in tight, most likely too painful to move, but the other seems to delight in its freedom. It twitches happily when he bickers with George, rests, brief and familiar around Karl's shoulder when he leans back, puffs up in indignation when George pokes fun at the state of his hair.

It's strange, but already Sapnap cannot imagine Quackity without them. It tugs a smile to his lips, as he plates up the bacon and eggs. Scrambled, for Karl and Quackity; sunny side up for George. Sapnap could never understand it, but he slides his (over hard, slightly burned) onto a plate and the rest (over easy, kissed a golden brown) onto another, and lays it to the side of the fire.

XD tilts his head. "**I don't need food,**" He says, the tuning fork bell of his speech-making Quackity wince. He must still have a headache from yesterday.

Sapnap scowls. "It's not *for* you, dickhead," and ignores the reproachful look that George throws him.

He doesn't avoid Karl's gaze though. For a moment, he can see the question dancing on Karl's lips, an echo of their fireside chat a few hours ago. He holds his breath.

Karl doesn't ask, and he regards his food as if he's trying to get the eggs to tell him the secrets of the universe. That is, until Quackity nudges him gently, and he and Quackity and George fall into another loud discussion that chases the cobwebs from Sapnap's mind.

If Sapnap ignores XD's looming presence, it's a little bit like nothing has changed except for maybe the wings and how subdued Karl is. George goes on as if things are normal, and Quackity does, too, with Karl only off just enough for Sapnap to notice. Then again, he's only known Karl for a handful of weeks and has never seen the aftermath of a session of soul-bearing. Maybe Karl is simply still packing things away inside.

"Supply check." Sapnap says when breakfast is finished, "We lost a few supplies back in town. I think one of us probably dropped a bag when we were fighting Butler and we didn't pick it up. We've got most of the non-food stuff, and a pretty strong supply of food, too, but definitely not as much as we need. I'll hunt as we travel, when it becomes necessary."

He pauses, hesitating for just a moment. After everything that's happened, do Karl and Quackity even want to come with them anymore? Surely they're more in danger than they would be on the road. Still, the thought of even reminding them that this partnership was temporary made something ache in a way he couldn't describe. Instead, he looks up, wondering if they can read the uncertainty on his face.

"What about medical supplies?" Karl blinks at him, either ignoring or missing his internal deliberation, and ignores how Quackity shoves at his shoulder, "We didn't buy too many. What's left?"

"Lots of bandages." Sapnap starts to list, "A few pastes that help with infection and numbing. We've got the potion of healing. Stitching thread and needle. George's migraine herbs, a few others that reduce fever or settle stomachs. Nothing fancy, but I think we have enough to handle any scrapes or bruises."

Karl nods, fingers fluttering nervously in his lap, but doesn't say anything more. Sapnap gives him a few seconds, just in case, before continuing.

"Our concern right now is water. We'll need to find a source to fill up, we didn't in town, so. That's the goal. Then we'll figure out where on the map we are and what direction we need to go."

"We are approximately two miles from a large body of water." XD speaks again. Sapnap wishes he would stop doing that.

"That was easy!" George says brightly, "What was next? Figuring out where we are?"

"Yes." Sapnap says through gritted teeth.

"I could climb a tree?" Karl suggests, "Get a look, compare it to my maps?"

"I really don't think you have the coordination for that kind of thing, dude."

"Oh, as if anyone has any better ideas!"

XD is suspiciously silent.

"Oh, come on," Quackity peers at him, "What, you can taste water up to ten miles away but you

don't know where you teleported us?"

"Teleporting is not easy." XD draws himself up, even if his voice stays steady, "**I don't control where we land. I can barely control when it happens. It...tired me. I've never done it before.**"

"You've never done it before!?"

"Think of it as a last resort." XD explains, "**It is not like a sword to be drawn. It's a miraculous occurrence. Once in a lifetime, perhaps.**"

"Well...I guess, if it was only gonna happen once, it's good it happened then." George sighs, "Sure wish you could have got us to the Badlands, though."

"I saved you!"

"Yes, and thanks for that! I'm just saying, it could have been a more efficient saving."

XD looks at Sapnap. Sapnap can't see his real face, but somehow he thinks that XD must be pulling an *are you serious* look. Sapnap just shrugs.

"Hey, you're the one that wanted to be his protector. George is never satisfied."

"What!? That's false. I'm just saying, if we were going to teleport, I just think we could have teleported *into* the Badlands. Saves us a trip!"

"I don't control where we land." XD repeats with a grumble, sounding affected for the first time, the tone of his voice finally shifting into something more petulant, "**So sorry to disappoint.**"

"I'm not disappointed." George corrects with a sniff, "I'm just *saying*. It doesn't matter now, anyway, Mr. Miraculous Occurrence. Why don't you and I and Karl go refill our water supply? Sap, you and Big Q can get a better fire going so we can boil the water when we bring it back."

"What's wrong with the fire?" XD says, affronted.

Sapnap had assumed, like a fuckin' fool, that George had put together the camp last night. George, who's never built a good fire to save his life. He really did have his pet demigod set up a perfect camp just to attempt to appease Sapnap. Why is Sapnap his friend, again?

"It's not big enough to boil a lot of water at once, XD." George explains patiently. "We'll have to make it bigger."

"I can do that."

"No, you're going to get water with me."

"I can do both."

"Why would you do both?" George scoffs, "You'll do the water thing. Sapnap is a big boy and so is Big Q, they can handle the fire."

"But -"

"XD." George frowns, "If you're going to be traveling with us, you're going to have to learn how to share tasks. You can't do it all on your own, you're supposed to be resting."

“Who said anything about him traveling with us?” Sapnap turns a dark glare on George, who pretends he doesn’t notice. “I didn’t agree to that.”

“What else can we do, though?” Karl frowns, “Just leave him in the jungle? He’s George’s friend.”

“He’s not.” Sapnap points a warning finger, “And watch whose side you’re on, Karl Jacobs.”

“I’m always on your side, Sapnap.” Karl says loyally, miming zipping his lips and locking them.

“That’s fuckin’ right.” Sapnap turns the finger to George, “That’s three on one.”

“What? Why am I automatically on your side?” Quackity complains, “I have my own opinions!”

“It’s not an opinion, it’s a yes or no vote.” Sapnap crosses his arms, “You’re voting yes?”

“Well.” Quackity pauses, looking between Karl and Sapnap and George, “What are the pros and cons of him?”

“He’s a demigod,” George starts to list immediately, “He can find water immediately, he emergency teleports, he doesn’t need to eat or sleep, he’s very loyal, he’s smart, he’s got a magic wooden sword, he’s strong, he’s -”

“Not able to be trusted.” Sapnap interrupts, “And that’s the most important thing. I can’t trust him and neither can you. It doesn’t matter how fucking many pros there, that’s a con and it outweighs all of them.”

“We can trust him.” George says simply.

“No, we can’t.” Sapnap takes a slow breath, “He’s connected to the throne, George. You know -” he has to take a second, swallow the sudden urge to scream. He trusts Karl and Quackity, he does, but he’s not ready for this conversation. Not yet. Not now, “You know what that throne’s taken from us.”

“I know.” George looks down, “I know, Sap. But I know I can trust him. I know we can trust him.”

Why are you doing this to me? Sapnap wants to ask, why are you making me do this? Why are you asking me to do this, I know you can see how much it hurts me, I know you’re pretending but I can’t pretend, it fucking hurts, George -

“Maybe you know,” Sapnap glances over XD and finds every part of him lacking, “But I don’t. And I can’t just - have someone I don’t trust in camp. Following us. Here when I’m sleeping, or here when I’m out hunting.”

“You let Karl and Quackity stay!”

“They aren’t -” Sapnap throws his hands into the air, “They aren’t tied up in the throne like he is! And they’ve more than proved their worth!”

“How can he prove it if you don’t let him?” George crosses his arms, “You’re being unreasonable, Sapnap!”

“I’m not!”

“You *are!* I know you don’t trust him but he’s -”

“He’s a demigod who gets his powers from the same fucking crown that took *everything* and

everyone from us, George!"

"You don't have to remind me of what the throne's taken from us, Sapnap, I am *fully aware* -"

"Then why are you even asking me this!?"

"Because XD is my friend and he's hurt now because he saved us, and he's helped us before, and we owe it to him!"

"I don't owe him *shit*, I didn't ask him to do any of that -"

"Well, I *did!*!" George stands up. His fists are clenched, his face tight with pain, and his shoulders are shaking. His face is unreadable, a mix of angry and hurt and distress that makes something so unfamiliar to Sapnap, "I did. I asked him to help keep you safe and I asked him to help me find food for us in the mountain and I asked him to save us in town. And now he's hurt, because of me, and I have to help him, Sapnap!"

"I don't want to." Sapnap finally admits, standing up, too, "Isn't that e-fucking-nough, George? Maybe you can forgive and forget so fuckin' easy, but *I can't* and *I don't want to!*"

"That's - that's not fair, Sapnap, you can't just -"

"I can!"

"No, you can't -"

"Enough!" Karl stands up, interrupting the tension, "Stop it, both of you!"

Sapnap clamps his mouth shut so hard his teeth clink together painfully. When he looks over, Quackity is halfway through a cigarette, wings tucked in tight. Karl is frowning at them, eyes clouded.

"Yelling isn't going to help." Karl sighs, "You two are going in circles."

"He won't even give XD a chance." George steps closer to XD, leaning on his arm to stay standing as his forehead creases in a familiar pain and Sapnap resists the urge to take it personally, doesn't let the feeling of rejection take hold like it wants to. "It isn't a choice. I owe XD and he's going to follow me, anyway."

"Where's my choice in this?" Sapnap demands, "You're not the only one that the throne hurt, why am I gonna be forced to travel with him just because *you* feel guilty!?"

"Sapnap, that isn't fair." George is blinking rapidly, eyes shining; guilt or pain, could be either.

"No, *this* isn't fair!" Sapnap motions to George and XD, "You just - you just expect me to, what, pretend that everything is fine just so we can have him here? Pretend that we didn't lose the most important person in our lives?"

George hisses, an exhalation of pure agony as he slumps into XD's side with his hands pressed to his head.

"Sapnap, stop it!" Karl says, as a shimmering wooden blade appears in XD's hand. Quackity is as taut as a pulled bowstring, his cigarette falling to the floor as he stands.

"I don't want him here," Sapnap seethes.

“I know.” Quackity speaks for the first time since the argument broke out, “I know you don’t, man, but this isn’t getting you anywhere except worked up.”

George raises his head from his hands, “Put the sword *away*, XD. It’s a headache, not Sapnap’s fault. They’re my friends.”

“Sure as fuck doesn’t feel like it,” Sapnap mutters and Quackity puts a hand quickly on his arm. Distantly, he hears the sharp inhale as George registers his words, a noise of pure hurt.

“Take a step back, Sapnap,” Quackity says, “Come on, man, that was uncalled for. You have a right to be angry, but you need to stop before you say something you can’t take back.”

Cool skin presses against the boiling, roiling blood under Sapnap’s skin, but Quackity holds on, squeezes tight. His face takes up the whole of Sapnap’s red-tinted vision. The cave. Steady breathing, keeping him alive as his world collapses around him. A familiar scar and two different colors for eyes, both colors a distraction that Sapnap readily allows to help him focus his control.

He pulls back from Quackity’s grasp as if he’s the one that’s been burned, though he knows Quackity’s palms must be smarting by now.

“Come on, guys,” Karl says from behind Quackity, “Let’s go get the water. Clear our heads.”

“Sapnap -” George starts, but it sounds like Karl begins to pull him away.

“Give him a moment. You need one too; Quackity’s right, you’ll end up saying things you don’t really mean. I’ll see if I can figure out where we are on the way there. Two birds, one stone. XD can protect us if something happens, right?”

“I will protect George.”

“No.” George’s voice trembles slightly, but his order is firm, regal, “You protect me, you protect them. They’re my *friends*.”

“My duty is -”

“Your duty is to me, XD.” George says, and Sapnap can feel the burn of his gaze on him, even as he refuses to look up, “And you *will* protect them like you protect me.”

Quackity tugs on his shirt, avoiding his skin but pulling him around, away, in the direction of the fire. It crackles, noisy in the silence. He focuses on Quackity’s breathing, the rise and fall of his chest, steady and unending.

“As you wish,” XD says, at last, subdued.

“Good,” says George, with finality, “Okay. We can go now.”

Sapnap listens to them leave with the footfalls of pallbearers, before sitting heavily in the dirt by the fire.

“Fuck,” He says, with feeling, “*Fuck*.”

“Fuck,” Quackity agrees, sagely, “Come on, you can mope while you build a fire.”

“I’m not *moping* -”

“Your best friend got a new pet and you don’t like him,” Quackity says, piling logs into his arms,

“And your best friend is dismissing your reasons why you don’t like him. So. You’re moping about it, man.”

“I have good fucking reason not to trust him -”

“Dude, did you not just hear what I said? You’re right not to trust him. But you’re *angry* because you think George is replacing you.”

Sapnap stills, his hand hovering over the firewood.

“It’s not... It’s not that he’s replacing me. It hurts, but I know it’s not because he’s replacing me. It’s because... he’s replacing *him*.”

Quackity frowns, “What?”

It takes Sapnap a moment to start, but once he does, the words tumble out like a landslide; a force of nature, unstoppable, gaining speed the further he speaks on, “He doesn’t speak about him. Never even mentions him, I think that outburst was the first time he even acknowledged that we lost him! And now there’s this green bastard in a mask that he trusts, trusts more than me, and he’s sneaking away to have soirees with him in the woods, like Dream was *nothing*, like he doesn’t even *care* -”

“Sapnap-”

“Dream fucking *died* for him and he hasn’t said a single goddamn word-!”

He pulls himself up short. He’s panting, breathing heavily, and Quackity has his hands out, inches away from his steaming skin and he just - he just said -

“Sapnap...”

Sapnap barely hears him. There is blood rushing in his ears, the roar of an agony that he has been unable to put into words for all the months that he has been on the road. There is an anvil on his chest, a realization sinking deep into his bones. His body feels hollow, a ghost haunting the spaces between his heart, and his knees hit the rough scrape of a log as he falls, the world swirling and twisting like the teleport except it’s nothing save for him, him and his own fucked up breathing. His breath splinters in his chest, jagged shards hitting every single part of him, inside and out; the summer days he sparred with Dream in the courtyard, George laughing and throwing grapes, the winter tales told while he curled up against his two best friends and kept them warm. He’s driftwood, thrown into the chasm of grief and he’s faulting, falling, failing -

“Look at me, Sapnap.” Something blocks out the sun, warm and soft and yellow, “Look at me, you have to look, alright?”

“I-I-”

“Like in the cave, Sap. Just like the cave. Breathe in for seven, out for eleven. Count with me. Don’t think, just count.”

The world comes back into focus by degrees. Blotches of colors and dancing embers from the fire, the dark honey and milky pale of Quackity’s eyes, the raised skin of his scar.

“Q...” Sapnap says, and swallows a sob, “Oh, fuck, Q,”

“It’s alright, Sap. I gotcha. Besides, I owe you.”

“I think we’re beyond debts at this point, Big Q.” Sapnap says, his voice tearing in the back of his aching throat, “God, *fuck*, this is so fucked up.”

“I know. I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault,” Sapnap says, mechanical. He’s breathing, hollow, a haunted house. He feels torn apart, bereft. His heart hangs empty, his gaze stuck on his hands. “It’s the first time I... that I’ve actually -”

“Yeah.”

Quackity’s hands ghost over his own.

“It sucks, man. I’m sorry.”

“I just,” Sapnap says, the words stuttering in his throat, trying to force the sentence out and the grief back, “I just wish I knew what happened. I wish George would fucking *tell* me. He’s just...Gone. I don’t know how and I don’t know where and I don’t know if he’s even dead and I’m...”

Sapnap inhales, sudden, as a memory strikes him, and he fumbles with the pocket of his shirt to pull out the letter from Bad. For all that it is a slip of paper, it feels like a stack of anvils in his hands.

“Sapnap, what is that?” Quackity asks, curious.

“It’s from my -” Sapnap starts, stops, reconsiders, “It’s from Bad. The ambassador for the Badlands in the capital. He’s been keeping me updated on the search for Dream. I didn’t want to, to get George’s hopes up if it ends up being nothing. But apparently, he’s already moved on.”

“Dude,” Quackity says, reproachfully, “That’s not true. People don’t just... move on from that shit so quickly. The not talking about it, both of you do it, just, differently, you know? Then it bubbles over and. Hits you all at once.”

“Like now.”

“Like now.” Quackity echoes. “You don’t have to read it now -” but Sapnap cuts him off.

“If it’s bad news,” He swallows, “George can’t be here. Not at first. I won’t be able to...”

“I understand,” Quackity says quietly. He reaches for Sapnap’s hand this time, only winces a little as he wraps his around Sapnap’s. “I know I’m not George or Dream, or your dad, or, fuck, even Karl. But I’m here.”

Sapnap blinks, feels the way his heart, which had begun to slow, starts to pound again. Quackity’s skin is cool, his touch calming, his eyes so focused and kind on Sapnap’s face.

“I don’t...” Sapnap looks at their hands, carefully folds his fingers down to wrap around Quackity’s, “I don’t need you to be any of them. Just you is more than enough.”

He gets to watch the way Quackity’s eyes go wide and surprised, gets to watch the flush that rises on his cheeks, the smile he can’t hide right away.

“Smooth.” Quackity flusters, “You’re learning.”

“From the best.” Sapnap agrees and gives himself a few seconds to just - breathe, with Quackity.

He doesn't need to ask, Quackity starts the timed breathing again and Sapnap matches their inhales and exhales. He lets his eyes close, sighs when Quackity carefully pulls him down. He goes, lets himself be pulled into a hug. Quackity's feathers brush his arms when he slowly winds them around his back and Quackity slides his palms up Sapnap's back to his shoulder blades.

"Are you uncomfortable?" Sapnap can't help but check in, lips against Quackity's shoulder. Quackity isn't like Karl. He doesn't seek out touch like one seeks out air. Even last night, Quackity hadn't spread out like Karl had, confined himself to the space Sapnap had settled him into in the beginning of the night. Sapnap appreciates this, didn't realize how badly he just needed a fucking hug, until now - but he doesn't want to make Quackity suffer for that, not even a little.

"No." Quackity tilts his head, letting his forehead rest against Sapnap's neck. "This is fine."

"Okay. Just for a minute."

"Just for a minute." Quackity agrees, and then lets Sapnap hold him for much longer than a minute.

When Sapnap feels whole enough to pull away, he hugs Quackity tighter for just a moment, a silent thank you, and then carefully drops his arms. Quackity holds on for just a moment longer.

"Good?"

"Good."

Quackity let's go, steps back while clearing his throat.

"Okay. I'm going to start doing fire stuff now. Fuck, they're probably on their way back by now!"

"They aren't." Sapnap half-smiles. "Two miles out, it's probably an hour walk there at least. At least another half hour for Karl and George to get on task. We're good."

"That was my excuse to leave you with your letter, Sapnap." Quackity grins.

"Oh."

"Go." Quackity hesitates, "And, you know, I'm. Here. Or something. If it's bad news."

Sapnap nods and watches Quackity kneel and collect the logs and sticks he'd dropped before scurrying off to give Sapnap space.

He takes the chance to return to the tent and sit on his bed, turn the letter over in his hands a few times. It's a little beaten from all the chaos yesterday, but intact. It weighs heavy in his hands, but the not knowing weighs worse. Good news or bad news, he'll have to take it as it comes. Brace for the explosion, and pick up the pieces later.

He unfolds it carefully, smoothing out each crease as he goes. His dad's familiar handwriting, written in their native tongue, brings him comfort.

He reads.

Hey kiddo,

Nothing good or bad. No body has shown up! :(but also :) for now.

Philza's flapping around but he hasn't been able to pick up on the trail either; a little distracted by

his kids sneaking out while Wilbur was supposed to still be on bed rest after the mess that was the election. If you see him, tell him he's been grounded. Technoblade is in town and none too happy about it. Take care; Schlatt may try to recruit him, though I'd like to see him try :)

Schlatt needs George if he wants to keep his power, and he'll be coming after the two of you more than ever now that he's won. We've heard something about a plan failing, but our mutual friend wasn't able to hear much. An advisor of his has disappeared, but I don't know if we should be glad about it or more concerned than before. Some say they turned traitor, which works for us.

You have to be careful. The closer Schlatt gets to losing it all, the more dangerous he'll be.

This might be our last drop-off for now, if you're heading home. I don't want them knowing where you are, even if it is unlikely they're monitoring these correspondences. We'll stay in the capital until you send word, then we'll come to you.

Go to the holiday home, the one where you burned a hole in the table when you were eight. You'll be safest there.

If he shows up, we'll let you know as soon as we can.

Love,

Dad

“Bad news?” Quackity checks in later, hand hovering awkwardly over his shoulder.

Sapnap uncrumples the letter carefully, smoothing over the tears his fingers have put into the parchment. He folds it carefully and puts it in his pocket again.

“No news.”

Quackity pats his shoulder and Sapnap lets himself find comfort in it. He has a lot of thinking to do about their next steps.

“Fine,” Sapnap says, hand pinching the bridge of his nose, “Fine. He can come with us.”

George’s eyes widen, “Wait, really?”

Sapnap nods. The three of them had tripped back into the camp a little bit after midday; Sapnap figured they could afford to stay in this clearing one more night, as they got prepared for travel, seeing that no one currently knew where they were. All three of them were carrying a couple of buckets of water each, though Sapnap knows they didn’t have that many buckets. Maybe a gift from George’s new fuckin’ friend. Karl had been chatting, animated as he dropped the buckets by the fire and bragged about his strength to Quackity and Sapnap until they’d appropriately stroked his ego. Then he’d spread out his maps, trying to triangulate their position. The walk had invigorated him from the quiet Karl Sapnap had witnessed earlier. His fingers fly in the air as he points out possible landmarks to a smiling Quackity, waiting for the water to boil. XD is still there, hovering on the edge of camp, impassively watching the controlled chaos.

“One chance,” Sapnap adds, holding up a finger, “He gets one chance. If he does a single thing that might put us, *any of us*, in danger, he’s gone. Okay?”

“Okay, Sapnap.” George hesitates, the tentative smile turning into something more serious, “Thank you. You... you didn’t have to do that.”

"I'm pretty sure he would have followed us anyway. Followed you." Sapnap tries not to scowl at that.

"Still," George says, "You were right. You just want to protect me, and I know he does too but after everything that's happened, I get why you can't just accept that at face value. If you... if you need it," George stumbles over the words, hands twisting anxiously, "He'll listen to me. If I tell him to leave, he'll listen. He might still follow us, follow *me*, but I'll work something out with him, so you don't have to see him -"

"It's alright, George, really," Sapnap holds up a hand, "I was...overreacting."

"No," George says, quietly, firmly. "No, you weren't. I was a total dick to you about this. You're my best friend. Nothing is going to change that. Not this, not XD, and not that gods-damned throne. I won't let it. You're my family. What you need from me is what you'll get. If that means XD stays out of sight, then that's what has to happen."

He tries not to show how much that simple reassurance relieves him, but George must see it on his face because his smile is back, and he grins up at him.

"You know I love you, right, Sapnap?"

"Yeah, I do." Sapnap sighs, the tension draining from his shoulders, "Love you too, idiot."

George gasps, mock offended, "Idiot?"

"Yeah. Moron, dumbass, a right royal pain in the -"

He's interrupted by a crowing from Karl as he yells triumphantly and nearly knocks over the water he collected in his celebration.

"I got it! I know where we are, Sapnap, come look!"

Sapnap tugs George in the direction of the other two, and Karl looks up with a huge grin on his face.

"Here, see?" He points to a spot between two mountains and a river, in the middle of a marked jungle biome, "This is us. And here -" He moves his finger over, pointing north toward a more familiar forest biome, "Is the route we were going to take through to the Badlands. But XD has taken us in completely the opposite direction, so what we can do is go through here -" He traces a line across the map from the jungle, "Still going through the Crimson Forest, but from the opposite direction. Hopefully that'll keep any pursuers away, especially since we're in a completely different starting point than we were before."

"So, how long do you think it's gonna take?" Sapnap asks.

Karl hums, tapping his chin. "The jungle is going to be difficult to get through, a lot harder than just a normal forest. We'll also have to stop for more water than we would elsewhere. And to get into the Badlands, we'd have to go through the densest part of the Crimson Forest."

"We aren't gonna go around?"

"Not unless you wanna add another month to our journey, unfortunately." Karl says, "But we can make it work. Going through, I'd say...three weeks? If we make good time through this mess. Four, if we don't hurt ourselves rushing."

"It doesn't matter where we get into the Badlands," Sapnap reasons, "just as long as we do. We can work out what happens after that when we get there."

"It's closer to a checkpoint than before," Quackity says, chewing on his lip, fingers twitching for a cigarette, "There might be more guards about than we planned for if we try to go around."

He and Karl share a look, something unreadable passing between them, but it's gone a moment later when George says, "We have XD now. And time to prepare. We'll be *fine*."

He drags out the last word, but throws a look to XD, still watching, mask blank and posture inscrutable.

"You're with us, right, XD?"

XD nods, a single incline of the head that is more of a gentle bow, "**Ever at your side,**" Sapnap watches as his posture shifts, leans backward on his heels, almost relaxed.

"**Your Highness,**" XD adds and Sapnap snorts at the expression on George's face.

"I told you not to call me that!" He says, and the pout on his face shakes away the minor tremor in Quackity's hands, covering his mouth as he laughs, and the pensive look on Karl's face turns into a grin, "It sounds pompous and ridiculous and -"

"It was a joke. I made a joke, George, was it good?"

"That's your idea of a joke?" Quackity asks, incredulously.

"Well," George grumbles, "At least it's better than sending someone to hell for a laugh."

"I can do that too."

"Don't," George says, fervently, "Do not, XD, we talked about this."

"As you will," XD says.

Sapnap buries his face in his hands, and Karl gives him a consoling pat on the back.

"If we don't die before we reach the Crimson Forest, it will be a miracle." He says, and Karl's laughter is as bright as the sun.

XD stays out of Sapnap's way for the next week. He sticks to the back of the marching order while Sapnap leads, Karl and Quackity taking turns whining about the pace to keep him from overmarching them and George ping-ponging back and forth. When they make camp, XD builds the fire and Sapnap sets the perimeter and George sets up the tent. Karl and Quackity take over dinner duty every night, and they do their best to break the chilly atmosphere that's settled over the group.

Despite George and Sapnap talking out their argument, there is still a chasm between them that it opened up and Sapnap doesn't know how to close it. Or if he's willing to, right now. He's still a little raw, and he thinks George is, too, and it's hard, being together twenty-four hours a day, every day, with no end in sight, when part of him feels like George took a grater to him. He's more and more grateful for Karl and Quackity each day; Karl, who is loud and lovingly disinterested in giving anyone space, who throws himself into Sapnap's arms to get his attention without hesitation and drags XD into long, convoluted arguments that seem to only confuse both of them; Quackity,

who grows more comfortable with them every day, who's finally started to laugh out loud without immediately covering his mouth, who has begun to let his wings be free, slitted shirts so they can rest in the sunlight, who gets into loud, useless arguments with George that offer endless entertainment and always knows when to make Sapnap take a walk before he starts getting angry.

Sapnap doesn't know when the decision was made, but he doesn't share George's bed anymore. He tends to get passed between Karl and Quackity, used for warmth by whoever isn't on watch. When it's George's turn, they bully him into sleeping between them and never complain about soreness the next morning.

He knows George and XD still sneak away, sometimes, and it bothers him, but there's nothing he can do about it. He won't ask Karl or Quackity to inform on George to him, doesn't want to place them in that kind of situation where they have to choose between him and George, but he catches them coming back from one of their getaways a few days into traveling.

Quackity had been on watch but Sapnap had woken up early to see him starting to list, exhausted from the heat and heavy pace of the day. He hadn't seen George or XD around, but Karl had woken with him, as was usual, and Sapnap had taken over for Quackity, who almost immediately fell asleep with his head in Sapnap's lap and Karl curled up against his side, his cloak draped over them.

They come back an hour after Sapnap takes over, George leaning heavily on XD, their hands intertwined. George has a look of pain on his face, a hand to his head. Migraine, then.

"Oh." George stops when he sees him, a look of guilt immediately replacing the pain. "We, um...we were just..."

Sapnap sees the way their hands tighten around each other, George swaying into XD's side. He doesn't let himself think about it.

"George has a migraine." XD says unnecessarily, the first words he's directly said to Sapnap all week.

"His medicine is in the enderchest." Sapnap motions and returns to the fire. He doesn't look at them as XD leads George to sit and digs through the chest. He doesn't look at them as George chews the herbs, drinks water. Doesn't look at them as they disappear into the tent.

He runs his fingers through Karl's curls, sort of feels bad for using Karl like one might use a dog to calm down, but it works and he's able to focus back in on watching the jungle and not thinking about the hurt in his stomach. He shoves it down and pretends it isn't there until he doesn't even notice it anymore.

"No," Sapnap shakes his head, stepping behind Karl to adjust his stance, "Loosen your hold but keep your arm level."

"Why is this not clicking for me?" Karl complains, "Quackity got it!"

"I know how to use a sword." Quackity grins from next to him, where he's holding his sword perfectly well, "I might not be as skilled as some of us, but I can hold my own."

"Say that to my poor iron beauty," Karl sniffs sadly, "Twisted up by creepers as if she were not but some cheap trick."

"To be fair," Sapnap starts and then keeps his mouth shut when Karl turns a glare on him.

“Nevermind.”

“That’s right, never mind.” Karl grumbles, but he lets Sapnap shift him until he’s standing appropriately. He’s holding George’s diamond sword and XD allowed Quackity to use his wooden one. Without the demigod holding it, the glow is gone and it’s a simple wooden tool. Nightmare sits safely at Sapnap’s side; it’s too sharp and too charged to ever be used by a novice and Sapnap would rather not deal with it attempting to overwhelm Karl or Quackity at this moment.

“Alright, focus.” Sapnap pats Karl’s hip and steps back to take a look at his form again. He looks much firmer and a little more solid in his grip. Sapnap would still be able to knock the sword out of his hands with a single swipe, but they can work on that.

Quackity is more casual in his stance, but it’s a steady one. Sapnap nods approvingly, only stepping close to readjust his fingers.

“If you hold it like this, you’re not as likely to spring your wrist if you have to block a hit.”

“I try to not be close enough to need to block a hit.” Quackity grins and Sanap glances up at him and gets a little distracted by how close they are. When Quackity blinks, Sapnap gets caught up in how long his eyelashes are, and then in how nice his eyes look - the paleness of his injured eye versus the dark brown of his other one, how soft and relaxed he looks. Quackity’s smile turns soft, a little shy.

“Why are you staring at me?” He asks, “Is my face wrong for swording?”

“Don’t call it that.” Sapnap hastily steps back, “N-no, nothing’s wrong with your face. It’s fine. Nice. You have a nice face.”

“Oh, wow.” Karl points his sword to the ground and leans on it, “I think he means you’re cute, Q.”

“Shut up.” Sapnap glares, “That’s not what I was saying.”

“So you don’t think I’m cute?” Quackity frowns and Sapnap *knows* he’s being baited but -

“You know you’re cute.” He grumbles, “We are all fully aware of how cute you are. Shut up. Shut up, Karl!”

Karl cackles, arms wrapped around himself like he’s hugging himself, “Oh my god, Sapnap, you - you’re so flippin’ cute, what the hell, man -”

“Pick up your sword.” Sapnap turns away, checking in to see if XD and George have returned yet. They’re meant to be out hunting, bringing back some meat or wild vegetables or fruits for tonight’s dinner. They’ve run out of rations so it will be hunting and foraging from here on out. There’s no sign of them, much to his consternation.

“No, you’re going to want to spar and that sounds awful.” Karl shakes his head, but he picks up his sword when Sapnap stares at him and only grumbles about it a little. Sapnap sets him and Quackity up to spar so he can watch their movements, calling out advice and corrections. It’s nice being back in this role. Though young, he and Dream weren’t simple knights and never had been. They’d been trained from a young age to be George’s protectors. Sapnap had known he would be George’s knight before he’d even known George, a position that his parents had earned through duty and wiles. He’d been trained and, in turn, trained others even as a kid. When he adjusts Karl’s form, he’s reminded of hours on the field helping Punz, or of Sam correcting his own stance. When he shifts Quackity’s hands on the hilt, he’s reminded of Alyssa losing her sword in their first duel, of Callahan actually laughing out loud when she’d simply tackled Sapnap to the ground and won

anyway.

Training reminds him of the friends he's given up, but in a way that doesn't hurt. It brings all the sweet memories and leaves the bitter ones for another time. Sapnap sometimes feels like all he does is dwell in that bitterness, that it's twisting and reshaping him into someone he doesn't want to be but knows he needs to be if he wants to keep surviving and dragging George along with him.

His time with Nightmare is the only time thoughts of Dream don't hurt and he feels like himself again.

"He's gonna knock -" Sapnap tries to warn, but it's too late and Karl goes down with a *loudoomph* and rustle of undergrowth. Quackity cheers, wooden sword raised in victory, and Karl laughs from where he's landed in a pile of long limbs and curls, sitting up slowly. Sapnap watches him wince and rub at his shoulder and then Quackity is there, offering a hand that Karl accepts.

Sapnap watches them and knows that if anyone saw him, they'd see more than he wanted them to at this moment. He's good at hiding his emotions, but never his adoration.

"Okay, you two." He claps, "I think we can call it quits for now. I don't want anyone getting hurt."

"It's okay, you can say Karl." Quackity ducks under Karl's swinging arm, laughing, and apologizes by massaging Karl's shoulders, "It's okay. You're just skilled in areas that aren't swords!"

"Just you two wait." Karl grumbles, relaxing into Quackity's touch, "When we get a potion stand, you two are *done* for. I'm turning you both purple. You're gonna have to beg me to change you back."

"Well, if that's all you want us begging for," Sapnap says before he can stop himself, but then gets to bask in the startled, overjoyed look that takes over Karl's face alongside the blush that covers Quackity's.

"You're flirting!" Karl yells, "He's flirting, Quackity!"

"I heard." Quackity ducks his head, but he's smiling again, "That was not slick, Sapnap."

"I'll do better next time." Sapnap promises and goes to collect the wooden and diamond sword left on the ground. He wouldn't have stood for that if they were his knights, but they're his something else, so he doesn't scold them. George would light him up for that because he never let George just toss his swords around but - well. Well.

"Training over already?" George asks, emerging from the treeline, a familiar shadow hovering over his shoulder, carrying the game that George had clearly taken out with clean, precise arrows.

"Unless you want to be digging graves for these two idiots, yup," Sapnap says, even as George looks at him with slightly narrowed eyes.

"But you're barely even sweating, dude!" George says, coming over and letting XD sort out the game, "How are you supposed to be protecting all of us - whoops, sorry XD - all of us except XD if you don't even keep up your training?"

Sapnap knows that he's just joking, but he still feels his shoulders rising defensively, "Hey, I've been training perfectly well on my own, you dick!"

"Because an opponent is going to let you do all your fancy swording tricks -"

“ - Fucking Prime, don’t you start -”

“Before beating you to a pulp, come on, Sapnap, you’ve got to protect us!”

“Gods, you’re so demanding, I’ve been protecting you this whole time, your royal assness! One demigod pet and suddenly you think you know it all -”

“Who knows who might be out here -

“ - We’re miles away from anyone who could find us -!”

“You need to practice,” George insists, and Sapnap flips him the bird.

“Fuck off, dude,” He turns back towards the fire, “Don’t be lazy and let XD sort out dinner, you guys!” He shouts to Karl and Quackity.

“Hey, I caught it, you have to skin it!” George says, even as Karl screws up his face.

“Man, butchering is not for me. Dibs, not it!”

“Hey, not fair!”

He puts the swords away while Karl and Quackity bicker and joke, chasing each other around him as usual. Nightmare weighs on his hip. He knows that George didn’t mean anything by it, not really. That doesn’t stop the sword feeling like Atlas’ burden some days. Didn’t stop the chill touch of Nightmare’s hilt burning into his skin.

George might not have meant anything by it, but he was right. Sapnap needs to practice.

Night is already in full swing as Sapnap slips away from the camp. He doesn’t want to disturb them - doesn’t want to admit to feeling like this. But he can’t practice, not with George, a ranged fighter, or Quackity and Karl, inexperienced and more likely to get hurt than to help.

XD will stay with George. Of that, he has no doubt, and that is the only reason that he is leaving at all. It’s not like the dude actually sleeps, anyway. Besides, Sapnap isn’t going to go far. Only far enough that they won’t hear the sound of trees cracking in his wake.

In a small break in the jungle canopy, he stops, pulls out Nightmare. It crackles in his palm, the enchantments sending small static shocks as he runs his palm over the blade. Netherite is supposed to be warm, forged as it is from the rarest materials the sacred caves of the Badlands have to offer. Once named, a netherite weapon bonds to its owner and grows cold and bitter in the hands of another. It’s possible for the bond to break, if the netherite accepts that its owner won’t ever return; since he took possession of Nightmare, it’s been like he’s holding ice, a chill that runs deep to his bones whenever he wields it. It’s a comfort that Dream’s sword only warms for George, as all of his weapons did.

“I know,” He murmurs, “I miss him, too.”

Pushing the upswell of grief aside, he falls into familiar motions; stretches, arcs, parries and blocks, the same he would rehearse each day. Dream would always nudge the back of his legs with Nightmare until his stance was corrected, and Sapnap would try to trip him in turn. They had been the fastest in the guard, he remembers, their fights like water and lightning as their blades came together and apart again. By the time they were both sworn to George, it was barely a fight anymore; it was a dance. Two people who knew each other better than they knew themselves.

Talking wasn't always their strong suit, as friends, but fighting was a dialogue that they knew inside and out, backward and forwards. Sapnap would know if Dream needed an outlet because his strikes came sharper, faster. He would know if he was tired, putting too much of George's burdens on himself, because his swings would go wide. Even how he breathed, Sapnap knew; when he was angry, passionate, or on one memorable occasion, jealous.

And in return, he had his best friend. His first friend, when he was already inducted to training, but no one would dare talk to the half-demon kid who always ran too hot. A brother, who was never afraid to tell him if he was being an idiot, or if he had just shown Dream a brand new move, that he was awesome.

His swings are too wide. Nightmare cuts through trees and bushes like butter, but Sapnap won't stop, can't stop, because if he stops then all he will know is that his back is open and empty, unprotected for the first time.

Sapnap twists and Nightmare sings with loss and bloodlust, and if he strains his ears, he can almost hear Dream's voice, encouraging, teasing, always at his side.

"If you need a partner," The sound of a gust through windchimes, echoing in his ears, pulls him up short **"I would be happy to provide."**

Sapnap blinks, chest heaving. His eyes clear, and at the end of his sword is XD, the point directly under the space where XD's neck would be, if he had one that was visible. Sweat drips off him in the heat of the jungle's undergrowth, exertion making his muscles scream under his thin clothes. Gods, George *was* right; he was really out of practice to have his body aching like this. He blinks again, realizes that his sword is still pointed at his maybe-ally, and drops it.

"Sorry," He says, "Didn't see you there."

"I am very quiet when I want to be." XD affirms.

An awkward silence hangs in the air, Sapnap running his hand through his soaking wet hair. Nightmare, as ever, is cold in his hand, and he presses the hilt to his forehead, hoping to cool himself down.

"Would you like to spar?" XD queries again, with a tilt of his head.

Nausea twists in Sapnap's stomach, and it isn't because of the exercise. As much as he needs a partner to really, truly get back into practice, no matter how much George might have already moved on -

"No," Sapnap says shortly, "Thanks for the offer, but I'll be alright on my own."

"Very well."

If the journey hadn't made him so cynical, he would almost have said that there was disappointment in the monotone voice of XD. Sapnap's brow furrows, "Hey, aren't you supposed to be watching the camp?"

"Aren't you?"

"That's different, I -" Sapnap huffs, "Let's just get back to camp, alright? Before those idiots end up killing each other in their sleep or something equally dumb."

XD hums in what must be acknowledgment, because he turns and begins to walk - float? - back to camp.

“They really can be dumb.” XD says, suddenly, once the light of the low fire is in sight, “**George almost ate a bug today.**”

“What?” Sapnap splutters.

“I told him I would find it amusing. He wanted to see if I had grasped the concept of a dare.”

Sapnap shakes his head, stepping close to the fire and poking at it, before heading over to the tent to wake up Quackity for his turn on watch. “Yeah, that sounds like George. Well, did you?”

“Did I what?”

“Find it amusing. You know, George.”

The silence stretches on for a little too long to be polite, and so Sapnap shrugs, brushes it off.

“Whatever. Goodnight dude.”

He almost misses it, in the sound of Quackity shuffling up from the bed, quiet complaints as he yawns loudly, but he could have sworn that XD says, soft and muffled: “**Goodnight, Sapnap.**”

They stop for laundry after two weeks of jungle trekking, because Sapnap’s shirt is literally stiff and not even George can keep the disgust off his face when he put his cloak on that morning. They’ve been making do with short baths when possible, but Sapnap feels grimy and gross and even their extra clothes are now disgusting.

“We’ll be here a few hours.” He says, swinging the enderchest off his back and carefully setting it down, finding George and Karl with his eyes and giving them warning looks, “Don’t wander off. XD is helping with laundry, *not* babysitting you two idiots.”

“Hey!”

“And you,” Sapnap finds Quackity next, who is already yanking his shoes off, “Don’t get your wings wet until we have a fire going!”

“Yes, *dad*,” Quackity sticks a tongue out but quickly turns to glare pointedly at Karl, “Don’t.”

“Repeat a joke?” Karl presses a hand to his chest, “Me? Never.”

He still winks at Sapnap when Quackity turns back to the river and Sapnap holds back a laugh, tries to keep a straight face until Karl sticks his tongue out too and makes him crack.

“Come on, XD.” He mutters, nudging the shoulder next to him, “Laundry.”

“I can do laundry.” XD says, opening his arms, “**Let me do it.**”

“You’re going to *help*.” Sapnap says firmly, “Not do it on your own. Everyone give me what you want washed!”

They end up with a small pile of clothes, shirts and pants and cloaks and Sapnap strips down, too, while George and Karl and Quackity all run screaming into the river to, hopefully, bathe before

they play.

Sapnap spends the next hour with XD scrubbing clothes, thinking longingly of the cool water waiting for when he's done so he can take time to get clean, too. XD, despite being a demigod, knows enough that he actually helps. They finish up the pants and shirts quickly and then take special care with the cloaks. Karl's kept his to clean it himself, since it's filled with secret pockets and whatever enchantment Karl's never confirmed but Sapnap has suspected for weeks now, so they finish soon enough. The sun beats down on him as he stands with a groan, stretching his arms up and arching until his back cracks. He takes a few minutes to stretch out, his back aching from being hunched over and his shoulders smarting from the scrubbing, and enjoys the pull of muscle and skin and tendon, the way it hurts for just a second before he feels everything loosen up. He touches his toes, twists, rolls his shoulders back until he feels limber and relaxed.

"Woooh," Karl whoops from the river while Sapnap is in the middle of stretching his arms up to realign his spine, "Show it off!"

Sapnap immediately flushes, turning around to find where his idiots have run off to. They're all sunning themselves. George is stretched out but Quackity and Karl are both sitting up, looking in his direction; Quackity with a hand over his face and his legs drawn up to his chest and his wings in a loose fall at his back, Karl lounging casually with his hands cupped around his mouth to yell.

"Fuck off!" Sapnap yells back, "Come set these out to dry! It's our turn to lounge."

"For you, hotstuff, anything, if only you ask it of me while shirtless!" Karl stands up, dragging Quackity up, too. Quackity looks flushed, tanned warm from the sun and water with rosy cheeks and fluttering wings. It makes Sapnap happy, to see him holding them out a bit, free and loose.

"You okay, Big Q?" He checks in as they draw closer, "You look overheated."

"I'm fine, Sap." Quackity waves him off, voice a little high, "Sat out in the sun too long."

"Got distracted by the view and didn't drink enough water." Karl slings an arm around Quackity's shoulders and grins at him, bright and pleased, "Sure was a nice view, though."

Sapnap glances around, notices mostly just the same jungle they've been traveling through for weeks now.

"If you say so." He says dubiously, "Just hang these up to dry for us, okay?"

"Will do." Karl reaches out to pat his shoulder, hesitating just before making contact. Sapnap gives him an odd look but Karl just smiles and Quackity's eyes drop to where Karl is touching him for a brief second. "Enjoy your bath!"

"You two are being weird." Sapnap says with a look between them, but it's not weird enough to keep him away from being clean for the first time in what feels like years, so he leaves them behind with the clothes to step into the water.

It's lukewarm, leaning cool, and immediately refreshing. He walks deeper, doesn't stop until the water is just above his navel.

"XD, are you going into the water?" he hears George ask from the bank.

"I do not need to bathe."

"*What!?*" Quackity demands, "Say that again? That's so fucking weird, dude, what -"

Sapnap leaves them to the distraction, ducks underwater and scrubs at his hair to feel the water rush through. He takes his time, working his fingers through until the knots are gone and it feels - not as gross. When he pushes out of the water, he slicks his hair back and breathes in the fresh air, enjoys how it immediately chills his skin.

Whatever roasting had been happening on the bank has already ended, because there are no loud voices breaking the quiet. It makes him nervous, actually, to hear the lack of cursing and yelling. He turns in the water, the mud of the river bed slick under his feet, but all four of them are still there. Or maybe the roasting has simply switched targets while he was under because George laughs incredulously. Karl is staring at Sapnap, unblinking, and Quackity has covered his face again.

“You’re actually joking.” George speaks up, arms crossed and eyes as wide as his smile as he looks between Karl and Quackity, “That’s not real. That doesn’t *really* happen.”

“Shut up.” Karl says weakly, “It was - *no*, that doesn’t really happen. I don’t know what you’re talking about. Does *what* really happen?”

“You’re just jealous.” Quackity speaks up over Karl, “You’re just jealous because XD exclusively wears a big, shapeless cloak and gloves and a mask and -”

“*Jealous!?*”

“Yes, jealous, jealous, your Royal Highness -”

“Don’t call me that!”

“Quackity, I have tried that joke and it did not land.”

Sapnap sighs in relief. They’re fine.

He leaves them to their bickering and returns to scrubbing off with the cloth he brought with him, letting the loud, familiar voices fade into the background.

He’s done soon enough, scrubbing his face so hard it feels raw and feeling better for it. He’s already steaming as he steps out of the water, shaking his head to fling water out of his hair.

“Done already?” Karl smiles at him, “No rush, dude, we’ll take care of this!”

“It’s fine,” Sapnap shrugs, steam dying out as he dries off, his boxers drying out within a minute, “How are the clothes doing?”

“Not drying as fast as you.” George shrugs, “We might as well set up camp here for the night. They’ll be done by morning.”

“We can fish!” Karl claps, “Beef up our food supply a little. Fish is good.”

“We don’t have salt for it.” Quackity sighs, “But we can probably use it for dinner tonight and breakfast tomorrow.”

“It’ll keep in the enderchest.” George says thoughtfully, “It’s magicked for that kind of stuff. If you guys think we can catch enough fish to make making poles worth it.”

“It definitely will be.” Karl decides, “Come on, Sapnap, help me find big sticks. We can use all that string we collected from the spiders a few days ago.”

“What happened to *no rush, we’ll take care of this?*” Sapnap complains, but he follows Karl anyway, shaking his head as Karl leads him back toward the jungle trees. They find a handful of sticks Karl deems acceptable for fishing pole making and return to the others within half an hour. They’ve set up camp while he and Karl were gone and Sapnap takes the opportunity to collapse into his bed and catnap while he listens to Quackity and Karl attempt to put poles together while George heckles them.

As usual, XD is suspiciously quiet, but he chimes in when directly addressed and Karl is never one to leave a prospective conversational partner out so XD is soon dragged into the argument, too. Sapnap doesn’t understand the words through the haze of sleep, but he hears the tone - annoyed but friendly, calm - and it offers a comfortable atmosphere to relax in.

He must fall asleep properly because when he wakes, he feels refreshed and the sunlight has dimmed significantly. Someone has crawled in to join him. This time last month, he would have known it was George. Now, he’s used to bunking with all three of his human companions so he has to lift Karl’s cloak, now draped over him when he was bare before, to find Quackity snoring quietly with his face on Sapnap’s shoulder.

Sapnap sighs, takes a minute to wake up slowly. His hand had migrated to Quackity’s hip while he slept and he let his thumb rub circles into the material of Quackity’s shirt, which he must have put on before laying down. The other bed is empty, but Sapnap doesn’t acknowledge that or give it a thought. It was natural that Quackity would just join him. Even in the sticky heat of the jungle, the tent is comfortable enough. He can hear a fire crackling.

Voices are still drifting toward him, more subdued now, Karl’s song-like lilt and the bone-deep familiar timbre of George’s voice. When XD speaks, no matter how softly, the air still vibrates like a string being plucked but Sapnap has grown used to it in the near week they’ve been traveling together. He smells something cooking and assumes that the fishing poles were at least partially successful.

Sapnap feels when Quackity’s subconscious notices he’s awake and tips Quackity out of rest and into the waking world. After days of waking up with Karl, Quackity, or both, he’s picked up on the tics of wakefulness, and Quackity’s tell is always the little hitch in his snores before he slowly goes quiet.

“Awake?” Sapnap asks quietly, patting Quackity’s hip before removing his hand and stretching out, arching. Quackity moves with him, grumbling. Sapnap watches, fondness swelling, as Quackity pushes up onto his knees. His ever-present hat has fallen off in his sleep and it still rests on the bed. His hair is long and dark, mussed and fluffy from washing earlier. His eyes are half-lidded, face flushed from sleep and Sapnap’s heat, twisted in an unhappy pout about having to wake up.

“Your hat.” Sapnap offers, lifting the beanie up. Quackity blinks a few times, looking between Sapnap’s face and then the hat. He takes it and mashes it onto his head clumsily, yawning, and Sapnap can’t help but chuckle. He sits up, carefully reaches out to straighten the beanie up so it frames Quackity’s face right and Quackity lets him, still blinking slowly.

“Naps are awful.” Quackity decides.

“Go back to sleep.” Sapnap tugs at his hat one last time and then swings his legs out of bed and stands to stretch again, “I’ll save you dinner.”

“‘M up, ‘m up,’ Quackity quickly staggers out of the bed, too, using Sapnap as a crutch, “XD caught fish.”

“With the poles?”

“No, he just went out and caught them with his hands.” Quackity explains as they make their way out of the tent, “We didn’t have hooks.”

“We could have made some with bone.” Karl says with affront from his place by the fire. He’s checking on six fish, each roasting on a stick.

“Too much work.” George shakes his head, “No thanks. XD likes fishing. Right?”

“**I can fish.**” XD intones from his place at George’s side. His entire cloak is soaked through with water, which must be a little uncomfortable, but he doesn’t seem to be bothered at all.

“Don’t take advantage of the demigod.” Sapnap says pointedly and drops down by the fire just as the sun finishes setting. Quackity settles between him and Karl, a cigarette unlit between his fingers but being twirled casually.

“It’s not taking advantage!” George pats XD’s knee, “We’re teaching him different skills to see what he likes.”

“Mhm,” Sapnap nods, “I totally believe you.”

“It’s true!” Karl defends George, “XD said he wants to learn to be more human, so we’re gonna have him try out all sorts of hobbies! We are what we love, after all.”

“And it just so happened that it was time for him to try hand-catching fish as a hobby, huh?”

“Yes.” XD says dubiously, “**That sounds suspect.**”

“I think you got duped, man.” Sapnap shrugs and accepts a fish skewered on a stick when Karl removes it from the flames and passes it down, “Don’t let these three chuckleheads convince you to do everything for them.”

“Don’t listen to him.” George sniffs primly, “Two birds, one stone is a saying for a *reason*.”

Sapnap snickers but he passes the fish in his hand to XD, who passes it to George, who takes it with a grumbled *thanks*. Soon, the food is passed out and Sapnap leans back on a hand, tilts his head up to the sky to watch the stars blink into existence in the inky blackness.

“Big Q, you promised to show us those card tricks.” George remembers, “I want to see those.”

“Oh yeah,” Karl digs around the enderchest next to him until he pulls out a ratty set of cards Sapnap must have thrown in there months before they’d even chosen this enderchest to run away with, “Did you see, Sap? We found these!”

“Oh, sick.” Sapnap smiles, more for their excitement than because he cares about a deck of cards, “I forgot those were in there.”

“They would have made a lot of nights less boring when it was just us.” George sighs, “I could have been beating Sapnap’s ass at different card games for months.”

“Bullshit,” Sapnap scoffs, “I would have destroyed you.”

“We’ll have plenty of nights to test both of those statements.” Karl interrupts, “But tonight, I want Q to show us how to do card tricks.”

“How do you even remember I can do those?” Quackity complains, accepting the deck with confident hands, “I showed you *once* and it was literally over a month ago.”

“I remember everything about you, baby,” Karl simpers, fluttering his eyelashes, “From the cute mole on your back to your very cool, very useful card tricks!”

“Sometimes, I think that the world went wrong when we developed language.” Quackity turns to Sapnap, “Because it means Karl learned and now uses it to say dumb shit like that to me.”

“To be fair,” Sapnap pats his knee, “It is a cute mole.”

“For fuck’s sake.” Quackity turns to George, “Help me out here.”

“I dunno,” George presses a hand to his chest, “*I’ve* never seen your cute back mole. That’s something you save for your two favorites.”

“I’m not showing any of you shit. Come on, XD, I’ll show *you* how to cheat at cards, these assholes can rot.”

“No, no, I’m sorry!” Karl cries dramatically, draping himself across both Quackity’s and Sapnap’s lap, half-eaten fish on a stick nearly hitting the ground if not for Sapnap’s fast reflexes. “Forgive me, Quackity, I beg!”

“I’m not gonna do that,” George shakes his head, casually leaning against XD despite the damp cloak. He snuggles up close without seeming to notice when XD slowly sets an arm across his shoulders. It makes something ugly flare-up in Sapnap but he stamps it down. What George does and with whom isn’t Sapnap’s business. It’s been months, George has mourned, if he wants to get close and personal with his pet demigod, that’s not any skin off Sapnap’s nose.

“Please don’t.” Karl looks at George upside down, tilting his head back where he’s got it resting on Sapnap’s thigh, “These laps are reserved.”

“I don’t remember taking reservations,” Quackity complains, but he still leans into Sapnap giggling like crazy when Sapnap goes for Karl’s sides and Karl starts to squirm and yell for mercy.

They have to take a brief moment to recover when Karl eventually rolls off of them and nearly goes right into the fire if not for XD using a leg as a stop-gate just in time, but Karl eventually eggs Quackity into letting him and George crowd close so Quackity can teach them a few sleights of hand. Sapnap opts to sit a bit farther away so he can hear them and still lean back to watch the stars. XD must have a similar idea because he, too, doesn’t move closer.

He waits until he knows that they’re all enthralled, easily distracted as they all are, before he glances at XD, who is watching George across the fire.

“You really don’t have to listen to *everything* he says. You know that right?”

XD turns his mask to Sapnap. The fire reflects orange off the porcelain, nearly turning the X and D invisible due to reflection. **“I don’t know what you mean.”**

“You’re a demigod,” Sapnap rolls his eyes, “You aren’t a newborn. You know how to fuckin’ fish, dude. Look, I’m just saying - George will be fine if you say no to him.”

XD is silent. Sapnap goes back to the stars. They’re more peaceful than he’s used to, and he rarely takes the time to really look, so he does now, with his three favorite people giggling together about some dumb thing or another, and someone he doesn’t trust but thinks he could, one day, nearby to

help him keep track of it all.

“It made him laugh.” XD finally says, with the same frequency of a bug’s wings. **“When I stood in the water and tried to catch fish. It made him laugh. He almost cried from it. I liked that. Making him laugh. I just want to make him happy.”**

Sounds familiar, Sapnap wants to say. George has that effect on people. Sapnap knows firsthand what someone will sacrifice just to keep George safe. Despite his inability to stay still, his occasional brattiness, and his innate desire to push every boundary he’s ever come across, George is good. He’s kind, funny, and earnest in a way Sapnap would and has killed to protect. He’d have made a good king, if not for the throne. It should make Sapnap happy, that he’s somehow enthralled a whole demigod in the same way he’s enthralled countless others, Dream and Sapnap included. And it does - it’s a relief to know that George has XD.

It just...makes Sapnap feel something else, too. Something bitter and sad that he just punches down and into place with everything else he has no right to feel.

“Okay.” He says instead. “If it makes you happy to make him happy, then I don’t care. But don’t let them turn you into our pack mule. They’re lazy enough.”

“Yes, Sapnap.” XD agrees, and if Sapnap was braver, he’d say he heard amusement in that dry tone.

He doesn’t push. He just leans back, finishes his fish while he looks at the stars and half-listens to George, Karl, and Quackity play.

“Thanks for this,” George says, kicking a rock down the dirt path of the birch forest that they’ve found themselves in. The jungle is a day or two behind them, but the roiling heat has stuck around, clinging to their clothes in a haze of sweat and short tempers.

Karl and Quackity had been acting...off in the last twenty-four hours. Beyond just the flirting, and the staring, and the times Sapnap is certain that they’ve gotten heatstroke. Quiet conversations on the edge of camp have finally bubbled into frosty countenance the day before, with Quackity storming out of the tent, his wings tucked in tight to his back and Karl biting his lip and face like marble. They did their best to bounce off the others as they always had, but it was off. Wrong.

So, with a promise from XD that he would keep an eye on the camp, George and Sapnap have come to the woods, ostensibly to hunt down some dinner, but really so that the two back at camp can hopefully work out whatever it is that’s caused this argument.

“No trouble,” Sapnap says, “It’s good to have more people, don’t get me wrong, but...”

“You miss the old days?” George teases, “Just you and me?”

There’s a lump in Sapnap’s throat as he says, “Yeah.”

They wander in companionable silence for around an hour; hunting doesn’t always lend itself to conversation, but by the time they get to a small creek, Sapnap has a couple of rabbits hanging from his belt. Their conversation has turned into gentle reminiscence; avoiding the elephant in the room, of course, but Sapnap is happy enough to mellow in golden memories that don’t make his chest ache.

His thoughts are starting to turn back to camp where, hopefully, his friends have figured their shit

out, when he hears a gentle snap of twigs underfoot from their abrupt left. He has Nightmare out before he's even fully registered what he heard, stepping between the noise and George on instinct.

"Well," says a smug, unfortunately-familiar voice, "Look at what we have here."

"You have got to be fucking kidding me. You're supposed to be grounded!" Sapnap says and turns to find, arms crossed over his chest, leaning up against a tree and with a carelessness that he really shouldn't have, Wilbur Soot. "How the *hell* did you find us?"

"Call it a hunch," Wilbur says, shrugging, "Now this doesn't have to get messy, your majesty. I don't even have to call in the others, if you just come back with us."

"Like *hell*." George bites out, "Why do you even want me back in the first place? Your pissy revolution hates the monarchy, you always have!"

"Like you didn't hate it too! Need I remind you that you almost bankrolled that revolution?" Wilbur cocks his head, "We could have dismantled it from the inside, you and me."

"You just wanted that power for yourself," Sapnap says, thinking of half-told stories in his father's scrawled hand, of whispers of the failed elections, the events that got Schlatt to the position of power he was in today. His fingers dance on the hilt of his sword, "That's all it was. Not a glorious revolution, just power. It's why you sided with Schlatt, and look how that worked out for you!"

Wilbur scowls, something darkening in his eyes "How would you know what happened? You were long gone by the time we managed to oust Eret! You didn't see what that election caused, what it did to us! You've been out here, helping George skirt his duty and lazing about while Kinoko suffers under Schlatt's rule! You don't know -"

"We don't *want* to know!" George cuts him off, "Why do you think we're out here, Wil? We're not going back. Neither of us are going anywhere near that throne."

"That throne," Wilbur snarls, his anger suddenly springing forth like a feral cat, "Is the reason I'm here. Schlatt cannot be allowed to take it for himself. You *know* what he could do with it!"

"I don't care -!" George starts, his voice rising before he stops, eyes widening. Sapnap only just grabs his arm in time as George takes a faltering step forwards.

"You... Oh Wil, you *didn't*."

Wilbur bristles, "You don't get to judge me for what I did. I do plenty of that on my own, thanks."

Sapnap is utterly bemused. Bad said that after Wilbur's defeat, Phil had arrived and swept his sons away from Schlatt's unpredictable temper, that Wilbur had been injured, or hurt or something, and needed time to recover. Sapnap had barely noticed it before, but Wilbur is - different from the passionate peer Sapnap knew only a year ago. There is a streak of white in Wilbur's hair and the very way he moves is familiar to Sapnap. The same exhaustion lines both of them, from head to toe, that same guilt in his eyes that Sapnap sees in every reflection that he catches from streams and puddles.

What the hell happened to Wilbur Soot?

"I'm not judging," George says, and it's so much more gentle than his defensiveness of just a moment ago, and not a tone he would have ever expected George to take, "I get it. I do, Wil. Who... Who was it, for you?"

Wilbur looks like he's deliberating very hard over whether to answer, a frown passing over his face before turning into something softer, sadder.

"Tommy," He says, finally, "It was Tommy. He snapped me out of it, but I almost...it almost..."

Alright. Sapnap is officially lost.

"Then," George says, careful, "Then you know why I can't go back. What I will lose if I do." He steps back, next to Sapnap. Despite the situation, George's arm shoots out a barrier between Wilbur and Sapnap.

"Unfortunately," Wilbur says, "This isn't about you and what you've lost. Not anymore."

Wilbur opens his mouth, and yells, "TOMMY! I'VE FOUND THEM!"

For a moment, there is silence. Then, like some giant beast disturbed from its slumber, a great crashing of branches and footsteps comes from the undergrowth. Sapnap barely has time to let out a muttered "Oh, shit," before three gangly teenagers emerge from the edge of the forest. Ranboo is the only one not immediately carrying a weapon, but the other two have theirs ready and drawn.

"Oh fucking yes!" Tommy says, punching the air, "I can't believe you actually caught them!"

"Don't speak too soon," Sapnap says, Nightmare at the ready.

"Give it up, big man," Tubbo says, a slightly feral smile on his face, "You're outnumbered."

Sapnap remembers how Tubbo once caught him and a few of the guards with a trap that stranded them miles away from the city; an incident that had Sapnap on probation for a month for being outwitted by a child. Tommy was a natural talent, wild like fire and loud like thunder, not to be looked down on in a fight. And Ranboo...well, Sapnap knows the lands Ranboo comes from; despite his appearance and disposition, he is not helpless.

Still, this is a fight, not a chess match - and Sapnap thinks he'd give all three of them a run for their money in one of those, too.

"Outnumbered?" Sapnap smiles, tossing Nightmare from one hand to the other and back again, "Unless you brought your other big brother, I'm perfectly comfortable with this formation."

"Oi!" Tommy thrusts his sword at Sapnap from meters away threateningly, "Just because the ol' Blade isn't here, doesn't mean I'm not going to clart you!"

"I don't doubt it," George drawls, drawing his bow and slipping an arrow between his fingers, "But we're not in the mood to put up with your brand of chaos, Tommy."

"Chaos!?" Tommy nudges Tubbo, an indigent expression on his face, "They think we're chaotic, Tubbo! Us? Me? Chaotic!? I don't think so. I don't think so at all, actually, I just think I like a good time, that's all! Me, my blade, and the Dream-ster. Where is he, huh? You're not hiding him away again, like last time, are you?"

"Tommy," Wilbur says warily, and Sapnap startles; even with his crossbow now out and pointed at them, he didn't expect that small kindness. He heard them back at the town, after all.

They might be on opposite sides, but Sapnap looks at Wilbur and sees the same loss resting there. It hits Sapnap all at once; Wilbur tried to take the throne for himself. The white streak, the understanding between him and George, and Tommy, the only thing that could pull him back.

It was easy to push these thoughts out of his mind, thoughts of the throne and the country and the responsibility they left behind, back when they weren't *literally* being faced with the consequences. What had Wilbur sacrificed, to try and take that power? Wilbur, who was ruthless and ambitious and determined to pursue his revolution at all cost; Wilbur, who loved like breathing, who extended mercy to those he should be hunting; Wilbur, who had abandoned the call of the throne because of his little brother.

The throne had stripped George's mother of her humanity; George had feared it would do the same to him. What would it have taken from Wilbur, a man with no right to it?

What would it demand from Schlatt, who would surely claim it for his own in time and happily give it whatever it asked?

"Okay but seriously, *seriously*, where is he?" Tommy asks, "Because Wilbur dragged us halfway across the damn country, barely having time to *breathe*, and I want to actually fight that green bastard. He's not back at the castle, so where the hell is he?"

An arrow flies past Sapnap's face. He jumps in surprise, and Tubbo yelps as an arrow buries itself in the tree trunk next to his head. Behind Sapnap, hands shaking imperceptibly, George's face is pinched.

"Stop," He says, his voice pained, "Stop, *please*."

The look on Tommy's face falters, the confident smirk fading. Tubbo steps up, and a potion, swirling grey, appears in Ranboo's hand. They aren't going to hurt them; not with swords, at any rate. Still, potions of slowness are a bitch, and for all his fighting skills, if he's hit with slowness then the four of them are going to overwhelm him soon enough if he isn't striking to kill.

"We are *not* going back to that castle," Sapnap says, horrified to find that there is a lump in his throat and tears pricking at his eyes. It's George, he realizes. It's the first time George has ever really acknowledged that Dream isn't here, isn't with them, and it's certainly the first time that Sapnap has heard real, genuine loss in his voice. It hurts so much more than he thought it would. "Never. You've seen what that throne can do, Wilbur. You know why we aren't going back."

Something shifts in Wilbur's eyes, and his voice is that of the coiling politician when he speaks, oily and slick, "Not even for Dream?"

Anger flares in Sapnap's gut; how dare he, how dare he assume that Dream would want them to return, would want George to ever have to give up any part of himself for a role he never wanted. He opens his mouth to argue, Nightmare coming up reflexively, but he's immediately distracted by a shout of pain.

The bow clatters to the floor along with George, as his friend sinks to his knees, hands twisted in his hair. There's an expression of brief but overwhelming agony that flashes across his face, before George's eyes slip shut, and he thuds heavily onto the forest floor.

"George!" Sapnap cries, horrified, but all he can do is step over his friend, his liege, and try and protect him as best he can.

"You're coming back with us, George." Wilbur notches his crossbow, "And you, too, Sapnap. Both of you."

"Over my dead body." Sapnap grips Nightmare in both hands.

"If that is what must be done." Wilbur shrugs, "Ranboo, the potion, throw -"

There is a crackling, the electric charge before the thunder, the pall before the wave crashes against the sand, and Sapnap's view of his opponents is completely obscured by deep forest green.

XD stands, cloak billowing before him, wooden sword drawn.

"You!" Tommy points his sword, "Yo, maskface! What the fuck?"

Leave." XD intones.

"Fuck that!" Tubbo says, never one to really back down from a fight despite his small stature, "We've traveled way too long to just *leave!*"

He charges and Tommy joins him a second later, both of them running, swords bared, towards the demigod.

A flash lights up the clearing and Tommy shrieks. There is the smell of burning hair, burning skin, and Tubbo yells out, "Tommy!" as the sky thunders despite there not being a cloud in sight. Sapnap drops to his knees and kneels over George's prone form, frantically blinking past the spots in his vision to check his friend. He's breathing, thank the gods. No outward injuries.

When the light dims and Sapnap has blinked the blackness from his vision, he sees that Tommy is reeling back, smoking ever so slightly, arms and face singed and covered in soot. He staggers, tripping over himself. Wilbur's crossbow drops to the ground as he catches his brother. There is a black burn mark in the ground where the boy had been a moment before, Tubbo still laying mostly inert on the ground feet from it due to the blast.

"I will not be so merciful again." XD says, "**Leave and do not return.**"

"You -" Wilbur says, but with his brother dazed and injured in his arms, there is nothing he can do. Ranboo's gone to Tubbo's side while XD speaks, gathering him up while he weakly struggles to charge again, holding him back from another go at XD.

"Let me go!" Tubbo screeches, "You floating dickhead, you - you *electrocuted Tommy*, what the fuck, let me go, Ranboo, I'll -"

"Tubbo." With one final glare, full of vengeful promise, Wilbur turns, "We won't win this. We'll come back."

Tubbo goes quiet, but his glare is lethal through his curls and the dead-eyed stare of Ranboo's ender eyes match the feeling as Wilbur leads his group to retreat.

The moment they disappear into the trees, XD is next to them on the ground, cloak spread out in a pool around him.

"George," He says, his voice far softer than Sapnap has ever heard, but still ringing with all the resonance of a temple bell.

To Sapnap's immense relief, George stirs, "Wazzit...?"

"Hey," Sapnap says, sitting back to give him room, "You alright, man? You just passed out."

George hums, still blinking dazedly, "I don't... It hurt a lot. Like one of my migraines, but worse. I don't even remember what he said, just... that it hurt. Like something snapping."

"Does it hurt now?" Sapnap asks, but George shakes his head.

“Still feel a bit dizzy, though,” He admits, and XD tilts his head.

“We should head back to the camp.” XD announces, and without a further word, pushes his arms underneath George, lifting him in a bridal carry with seemingly no effort at all. George just sighs and leans into the embrace, closing his eyes, completely trusting XD. Sapnap sheaths his sword and tries to pretend that after all of that, after such a visceral show of grief, that it doesn’t sting. But then, XD did save them again. That had to count for something.

“What happened?” Karl demands, the moment they re-enter camp.

“The - Wilbur and the others caught up to us, somehow.” Sapnap explains as he unlaces the rabbits from his belt and sets them aside to be skinned, “George is fine, he’s just being a baby.”

“Am not!” George says, sticking his tongue out from his position in XD’s arms, a position where he really doesn’t have a leg to stand on.

“They caught up?” Quackity says, faintly, “How?”

“No idea,” Sapnap says, “But we should get moving, *now*. We can talk on the way.”

“They will not return tonight.” XD says, placing George down, achingly gentle, on one of the logs by the fire, **“We must move in the morning. George needs to rest. So do I.”**

Sapnap wants to argue, but there is already a difficult conversation on the horizon, and he doesn’t want to add to it.

“Fine. First thing in the morning, we go.” he hesitates, finds Karl and Quackity. Whatever argument they’d been having must be resolved, because Karl is clutching Quackity’s sleeve and there’s no tension between them. Just worried eyes. It makes Sapnap feel a little ill, to see that worry and know he’s been keeping so much from them.

“That’s if,” He swallows and forces himself to continue, “That’s if the two of you still want to.”

“What the hell, man?” Karl says, and Quackity makes a noise of wordless protest. “We aren’t about to abandon you, what the fuck -”

“That’s not what I meant,” Sapnap says, wincing at his poor choice of words. He glances at XD and George, sitting together so close by the fire that they might as well be one entity. Instead of sticking around where George could listen in, he herds them both into the tent, away from prying ears, and they go easy. When he has them both sitting on his bed, he sits on George’s, elbows on his knees as he just - lets himself collapse in. He sighs, looking at his hands and clasping them together.

“We’ve been selfish, me and George. The whole country is after us, and we’ve been dragging you two along without giving a shit about what that might be doing to you. It was such a dick move to ask you to join us, knowing what we are. I’m sorry.”

“Dude, you’re not dragging us along,” Quackity frowns, but Sapnap holds up a hand and shakes his head.

“I just want to make sure you don’t feel... obligated. Or that you owe us in any way. We’ve more than paid our debts to each other at this point, and it was my fault Q got hurt in the first place. I know you have...have that collector you’re trying to get to, but this is a really fuckin’ dangerous situation. It’s not worth any tale or book, being with -” *me*. “Us.”

Karl looks like he's about to protest, but a look from Sapnap stops him. He sighs heavily.

"There is so much fucking baggage that comes with staying. Believe me, there is a shit ton. You've already been hurt because you got involved in a fight that wasn't yours. With Wilbur and the others so close, there's a real possibility that it could happen again. And I can't..." He can't look at them now, "I can't protect you all. I'm not strong enough. I'm not a demigod. I'm just a half-demon with a good sword and a weak heart. I know you're smart, and you're capable, but if the guards come after us, I can't kill them, not even to save George. They were - they *are* - my friends."

"Sapnap -"

"But so are you!" Sapnap continues over Quackity, "And I don't want to see you get hurt because of us anymore. With all the maps you've drawn us, we could get through the Crimson Forest on our own, and you two would no longer be in danger because you're on the run with undesirables one and two. You could find a town nearby, stock up. I'll write to my dad, have him send you guys a seal that you could use to get into the Badlands through proper channels. You don't have to stay."

"Dude," Karl says, the only person able to make that word sound forlorn, "Do you really think that we'd leave because there might be a small chance we get hurt?"

"Yeah," Quackity says, voice slightly choked, "Part of the job, you know?"

"It's not a small chance, Karl, I don't want to force you -"

"You're not forcing us to do anything," Karl insists, "We're here because we want to be. We're helping because we want to. Right, Big Q?"

"Yeah," Quackity swallows, quiet.

"But -"

"Hush." Karl leans forward and covers Sapnap's mouth with his palm, face serious. "It's our turn. This is bigger than us now." Karl says, "You and George, and even XD, you're our friends. We don't just run out on friends, despite what my track record may look like."

"You're stuck with us, Sapitus," Quackity says, a smile pulling at his lips under sad, unreadable eyes. "We're like fleas, you can't wash us off."

"*Dude*," Sapnap says, and even though he's laughing, he can feel himself getting choked up.

They aren't going to leave. They aren't going to leave, and it feels like his heart is growing and breaking all at the same time. They should leave. The best thing to do, for all of them, would be to leave. But they don't want to, and Sapnap doesn't want them to, not really.

Karl, being Karl, hugs him first. He buries his face in Karl's thick hair and inhales parchment and ink, tastes the stories Karl tells as they walk. Quackity moves in a moment later, tucking his chin on top of their heads. His feathers rustle in the small space of the tent, and it feels like another hug on top of everything else.

"If you're going to travel with us," Sapnap says, after a few long minutes held in their arms, "You should know as much as we do. You've more than earned it at this point."

Karl frowns, sitting back to give him space, "You don't have to tell us anything -"

“I want to,” Sapnap says, taking a deep breath. “I trust you.”

“Okay,” Quackity says, pulling back from Sapnap and motioning to the tent flap, “Do you want me to get George?”

Sapnap shakes his head, “No, he, uh, he doesn’t like to talk about it. Even before everything, he... well, he wanted to think about it as little as possible. Understandable, considering, but. It made planning for it a lot harder.”

He can feel their quizzical looks, and so, barrels on. The faster he gets this out of the way the better.

“The throne of Kinoko - it’s not just a chair. It’s an oath, given by the royal family centuries ago. In return for the power to rule, the current monarch has to...give up something. In return for the power of the throne, George’s mother, she...well, his dad used to say how kindhearted she was. How she loved each and every person in the kingdom, how she loved *him*, more than anything. But when she became Queen, she... It took that. Her mercy, her kind heart, what made her human. Now, all that people remember of her is that she was cold, that she didn’t really care for her people at all, just her crown.” Sapnap snorts, mirthlessly, “No wonder there were so many rebellions and revolutions. Who wants a ruler who doesn’t care for them at all?”

“So if George was to go back...?” Karl says, even though he must surely already have an idea of the answer.

“We didn’t know what it would take,” Sapnap says, “George, he... he never wanted to be a king, even before learning about what the throne would do to him. And me and Dream... well. We’d do anything for him. We were researching ways to destroy the throne, stop it altogether. We didn’t want to lose our best friend, you know?”

And this is it. The hardest part. “I’m sure you know about Eret’s coup, right?”

He can’t look at them, but he can see their shadows on the wall of the tent as they nod.

“We’d sided with Wilbur and his rebellion in the past, trying to see if they could help us destroy the throne for good. But we weren’t with him when he helped Eret kill George’s parents, or when we thought he was going to try and outright kill George. Me and Dream, we... in the chaos, we got separated, trying to find George.”

“You take the east wing, I’ll take the west.”

*“Dream, the Queen is dead, the **throne** -”*

“I know! We have to find George, and get him out of here before either the soldiers or that fucking throne can get him!”

“It’ll be safer if we stick together!”

“We’re more likely to find him if we split up. We have to find him, now!”

“...Okay. Okay, fuck, fine, I’ll go east.”

“Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me yet. Take care of yourself, Dream, don’t do anything stupid.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it, Pandas.”

Sapnap realizes his fists are clenched, and forces them open, stretching them out and forcing the fingers straight. Cool hands slide into his; Quackity. He holds on tight, not daring to let go.

“The next time I saw George, he was in the throne room,” He says, careful, voice deliberately steady, “Unconscious. His head was bleeding and I was so fucking terrified that I was too late, that it had already taken the George that I knew away. I couldn’t do anything else except run. It’s what Dream would have done, I didn’t even have time to try and find out what happened to him. My dad helped us escape and hide out for a while. George was unconscious for a week and when he woke up and smiled at me, I - I nearly lost it for good. It was still him, still George. Even though Dream was gone, at least I still had one of my best friends. So,” He finishes, clearing his throat, “So that’s why we can’t go back. No matter what, no matter who comes after us because of it. George can’t ever sit on that throne. I’ll lose him, but he’ll lose something so much more.”

“Okay,” Karl says, easily agreeing as if Sapnap just asked him to take a walk, or make dinner, “We won’t go back. Not now, not ever.”

“Sapnap,” Quackity adds, more nervous than Karl, if the twitch of his fingers is anything to go by, “You... you didn’t have to tell us. But you did. So. Thank you, man. It means a lot. To trust us.”

“Thank you for listening,” Sapnap says, and they all know he really means *thank you for staying*.

Something wet drips onto his hand, and with a rising horror, Sapnap realizes that he’s crying.

“Oh, Sap,” Karl says, gentle, and cups Sapnap’s cheek, brushes away the tears, “It’s okay. We’re not going anywhere. You’re not the only one protecting George anymore.”

Quackity shifts to his bed, settling in next to him, one wing held around Sapnap’s shoulders, barely brushing but enough to feel like a warm blanket, “You’ve been so brave, Sapnap. Seriously. I don’t think I could be that brave.”

“Never say never,” Sapnap says, laughing even though his eyes are still burning with tears, “I saw you go up against that crab the other day. That was pretty brave.”

“Hey, don’t make fun of me!” Quackity says, indigent, and thank the gods for it, for lifting the weight of serious topics from his shoulders. He didn’t know how much he needed to say it aloud before he did; didn’t know how much his silence had been weighing on him. Quackity nudges him with a wing, “I’d like you to know that my crab was fucking enormous!”

“Is that just another word for your di-”

“Do not, Karl,” Sapnap says, “Do not. I won’t be able to handle it. I’m tired enough already.”

“We should get some sleep if we need to move quickly in the morning,” Quackity agrees.

“An early night for all of us, then.” Karl says, with a soft smile.

They shift so that Sapnap is in the middle, as usual, the motions of the nighttime routine coming easily to Sapnap’s brain, already tired and overworked and wrung out from digging up old memories. He lets Karl push him around, strip his shirt off so he’s comfortable. Quackity kneels at his feet and unlaces his boot for him and Sapnap can’t help but look between them, a little bit in awe of the luck that he’d had to stumble into them in that forest.

“What about George?” Karl asks, once they’re all comfortable under his cloak, the familiar weight

settled over them and seeping its comforting enchantment down into their bones. Sapnap is half asleep already, warm and secure.

“What about him?” Quackity grumbles, “If he wants to get in the bed, tell him to piss off. There isn’t enough room for four. And we both know XD would try to crawl in with him.”

“Technically, there isn’t enough room for three.”

“Pssh. Semantics, Sapnap. Anyway, George. He’s gonna be okay out there?”

Something rotten curls onto Sapnap’s tongue, but he’s too tired to hold it back, as weak as it is.

“He’s got XD. He’s summoned one lightning bolt today, he can do it again if anything happens.”

“He summoned a lightning bolt?!”

“Hush,” Karl says, waving away Quackity’s incredulity, “Sleep time. No talking.”

Quackity mumbles something into Sapnap’s chest, and for a moment, he can barely breathe over the wave of fondness that sweeps through him then.

Not now, Sapnap thinks, encircled by arms and wings and feathers, but soon. I’ll ask them to stay. And I think they might even say yes.

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

hello hello! This is the first time IM posting a chapter oh gosh. Ive been given a LIST OF THINGS TO SAY so i dont forget anything (thank u mari i adore u)

This chapter is one of our absolute favorites (I think it IS mari's favorite). Mari wrote some INSANE folk tales for this chapter (including one of my favorites of their original tales) and really hopes you enjoy them <3

Also also [WE HAVE ART!!!!](#) Please go check out @amusingghost on twitter, they drew Quackity, Karl, and Sapnap and it looks amazing!!! Their art is so COOL so you should definitely give them a follow :)

Thirdly, this chapter comes with music. Mari and I listened to [The Consolations of Philosophy](#) by Max Richter while writing part of this chapter and it DID make us both cry. We highly recommend you play this song while reading the scene that starts with: "*Whatever you need.*" *Sapnap says seriously.* You will know the one, even without the music soft piano will play in your head as you read it.

Lastly, this is the last chapter before everything starts to go a lil haywire. Get ur theories out now kids we got ourselves a lore drop comin soon ;) Enjoy the continued slice of life (minus the pun this time MARI)!

cw: violence, implied past abuse

It's hard to imagine that in a few days' time, Sapnap will be home.

He hasn't been home, properly, since he was eight. The last time he'd stepped foot in the Badlands had been nearly six years ago, when George had turned eighteen and had to make the rounds to kiss politicians and shake some babies' hands. Dream and Sapnap had accompanied him as companions and guards and they hadn't left the confines of the political sphere.

They won't be in the safe haven of the capital this time. After the Crimson Forest, Sapnap knows they'll have miles of treacherous soul sand biomes and dark forests to traverse before they make it to his holiday home. If they're lucky, they may run into a trader willing to drive them for a fee. If they're unlucky, they'll face bandits and Badlands mobs.

Either way, they'll be safe from Schlatt, Wilbur, the throne, and everything else chasing them in this fucking country.

"Whatcha thinkin' about, Sap?" George sits next to him, offering a chunk of rabbit. They've been eating nothing but rabbit and wildfowl for the last two weeks, the only things they had time to hunt and butcher on their mad dash through the plains between the jungle and the Crimson Forest they were headed toward. He was sick of both by now, but he accepted the meat without complaint and bit into it ravenously. They'd been walking all day and every part of Sapnap hurts - from his toes to the tips of his ears. He can't imagine how the others are feeling - Quackity is practically asleep on his feet, leaning on Karl, who's slowly roasting another rabbit. XD is the only one of them still on

his feet and he wanders the perimeter of their camp as night falls, staring off into the distance for a moment in one direction before turning to stare into the distance in another. Sapnap watches him, more curious than suspicious by this point, mostly just tired.

“Home.” Sapnap admits, leaning against his shoulder. George hums to show he’s listening so Sapnap continues, “It’s gonna be weird, being back in the Badlands. It’s been a long time.”

“You can show me where you grew up! It’s finally your turn.”

Sapnap smiles a little, nodding, “Yeah. We’re going somewhere full of stories. You’ll like it.”

“Did someone say stories?” Karl perks up, blinking slowly from the fire. The final rabbit is done and he pulls it from the flames. Quackity blinks awake, sitting up and looking around in that confused way he does when he’s tired and freshly awoken.

“Yes.” George nods, “Sapnap was telling me about the Badlands, where he grew up.”

“I grew up in Kinoko.” Sapnap corrects, “I left the Badlands when I was like, seven or eight, dude. I barely remember most of it.”

“You remember some of it, though?” Quackity stands and stretches, wings spreading out and fluttering gently as he reaches up to pull his muscles. Sapnap watches him fondly, tracing the newly-grown-in fuzz in some of the previously bald spots with his eyes. There’s a healing scar where Billiam’s blade glanced the skin, but his feathers are looking shiny and healthy, if still disheveled from lack of preening. A few more weeks, a month maybe, and Sapnap thinks they’ll look good as new, scars hidden by fresh feathers. There’s nothing to be done for the pinioning, as badly as Sapnap wishes there were, but the feathers, at least, are a nice start to healing. They’re getting stronger, too, now that they aren’t being pinned under Quackity’s clothes all the time.

“Some.” Sapnap admits.

“Tell us something. A story you liked as a kid.” Karl knee-walks over, rabbit in hand and dagger in the other so he can start carving it into pieces. Quackity sits in front of him and Sapnap watches them share the rabbit, Karl slicing off cuts to hand to Quackity and Quackity taking a bite or feeding it to Karl since his hands are full.

“XD, come here! Sapnap’s going to tell us a story!”

Sapnap waits until XD has stopped gazing outwards, shoulders tense, and comes to sit and bracket George with his knees. Something twists at the sight of them, George nestled into XD like he would for Sapnap, or for Dream.

Instead of saying anything about it, Sapnap just clears his throat, “I’m not sure how good it’ll be. I don’t have your memory, Karl.”

Karl shrugs, “That’s what books are for, man. Come on, if you forget something, just make it up. That’s what I do.”

“Way to keep old legends alive, if you just keep rewriting them -”

“Shh!” George hisses, tired and pouting and in no mood for bickering. “I wanna listen!”

“Well, just, bear with me,” Sapnap says, holding up his hands. “So. Once upon a time -”

“What are we, five?” Quackity asks, but Karl elbows him and he shuts up.

“Once upon a time,” Sapnap repeats, “There was a woman who lived in the woods. She loved the woods more than anything in the world and though she was friends with most of the nearby town, none would venture through the woods to see her. It was full of wolves, and their leader was a wolf more powerful and more dangerous than any other. But this woman loved the woods, and so, the wolf.”

‘Now, this woman knew some magic, and with careful preparation and study, knew that she would be able to have both her friends visit, and still live in the woods as she always had. So one night, on the full moon, she stepped outside and saw the wolf there. And once she had cast her spell, the dangerous, terrifying beast was no longer. Instead, there was a man; tall and handsome and strong, and she fell more in love with him than anything else, even the woods. In time, they were married, and the woods were safe enough for the entire village to come celebrate their wedding.’

‘The seasons passed, and the woman gave birth to a son, and for a time, they were happy. But the woman was not content. At night, she lay awake and feared that her magic would fail, and that her husband would turn back into a wolf, and kill both her and their child. At first, she tried to ignore these fears, but they only grew and grew in the back of her mind until she was sick with the terror of it. Finally, she crept out of her house and to the village, where she found the hunter. She told him that the wolf had returned, that he was stalking her home, and that all the hunter had to do was come to her home the next night and slay the beast. The hunter agreed.’

‘The next night, she asked her husband to fetch some firewood, and then locked herself and her son inside the home. Watching from the window, she lifted the spell that had kept her husband human, determined to watch until the hunter had killed him. But unbeknownst to the woman, by lifting the spell, it had affected her son as well, turning him into a wild wolf cub. Once victorious, the hunter came to her door with a fresh wolf pelt, only to find the woman dead, and no sign of the child she had been so determined to protect. Just a young wolf pup.’

Sapnap swallows; the camp has gone very quiet. “It’s said that the gods took pity on the young cub, now cursed and alone, and made him into a constellation, so he could run forever without fear of hunters. He’s up there, look,” Sapnap points upwards, “See the two stars running down, connecting with the brighter third and fourth? A little wolf cub.”

“Damn,” Quackity says quietly, “They don’t hold back on bedtime stories in the Badlands, do they?”

“Yeah, that’s harsh.” George says, nose scrunching up, “All she wanted to do was protect her baby.”

“By killing her husband,” Sapnap says, “Look, I dunno, alright? Just something my dad would tell me. Maybe it’s a metaphor about nature, like, you can’t tame something inherently wild. Or you should be content with what you have. Don’t get hung up on what might happen. I dunno, dad was always full of those kinds of stories. The ones that had lessons. My other father thought it was stupid.”

“Does anyone else have a story?” Karl looks between them, “Maybe something a little bit more romantic?”

“I have a story.”

George’s eyes widen, “Wait, you do?”

“I know a lot.” XD says, flatly. **“It’s about the stars.”**

“Is it happier than the last one?” Karl jokes, and Sapnap can’t help the wince.

“Hey, you guys wanted a Badlands story, that’s what you got!” he defends, and Karl holds up his hands placatingly.

XD tilts his head, “**It is about the stars,**” He repeats and George laughs.

“I think that’s him telling us that it’s maybe happy? Where did you hear it from?”

“**The sea.**”

“That’s about as cryptic as XD usually gets. I’ll take it.” Quackity shrugs, “Go right ahead.”

“Once,” XD intones, “**There were three lovers. A soldier, a bard, and a merchant. Each loved the other equally, and love was all they had, for they lived on whatever their merchant could sell, or what coins their bard could sing for. And they were content, for they had each other.**”

As he spoke, XD’s arm pointed upwards, towards the stars, tracing their outlines with a practiced hand. Sapnap could almost fancy he could see the three there, hiding away in the cosmos. Perhaps it was just the ashes of their fire.

“**Still, the bard was not fully content. They wanted their partners to be comfortable, to live without the fear of starving or freezing to death. For weeks, they toiled, working on a melody to speak to the universe. When it was done, they went to the bank of the nearest river, and they sang a song so beautiful that the river itself wept gold, and with that gold, they brought food and firewood and a home cozy enough for the three of them.**

“**But still, they were not content. They feared that the merchant still had debts that would call soon, that those debts would force the merchant far away until they were paid. So once more, the bard locked themselves away to write another melody. When it was done, three summers had come and gone. Their lovers, having waited for them, each and every day, were overjoyed to see them again, but they had a job to do. They went to the city center and sang so sweetly that the cobblestone under their feet shifted and revealed to them enough precious ore to pay off each and every one of the merchant's debts.**

“**But still, they were not content. They feared that the soldier would one day be called once again to war, and that they would lose them. So this time the bard kissed their lovers goodbye, and went to walk the world, singing all the while a song of peace and harmony, hoping to forever end conflict. They sang so long that their throat and fingers bled, a path of crimson throughout the world. It was years before their song was heard across the world, but they did it, and once they had, they returned to their cottage, and to their lovers because the land was at peace.**

“**But to their horror, they found the cottage empty, the hearth cold, and two lone graves in the garden. For they had been gone so long that their lovers had each died from heartbreak, believing their partner would never return. They no longer had a voice, so could not sing them to life, and their fingers were worn to the bone, so could no longer play. Instead, they wept for their lovers, and for the time that they had wasted on fearing what may have come to pass.**

“**Bring them back,’ The bard begged, ‘For it is not life without them.’**

‘We cannot,’ The river replied.

‘I will sing you a song so beautiful that it will be remembered forevermore, if only you return them to me.’

‘We cannot,’ The cobblestone replied.

‘I will give you my talent, my ability to play and to sing, if only you would return them to me.’

‘We cannot,’ The world replied.

‘Then I will give myself, so that they have a chance of life without my selfishness, if only you would return them to me.’

‘We cannot raise the dead, no more than you can sing them back to life,’ the gods told the bard, ‘But you have sung so sweetly, and played with the grace of the gods themselves. Your river of gold fed thousands, and the debts you paid relieved many more. The wars you stopped saved so many with your songs of peace. Take happiness in this.’

‘It was for them. I would give it all back, if only you would return them to me.’

The gods paused. The world, for a brief moment, stayed as still as stone.

‘We cannot raise the dead,’ The universe told the bard, ‘But we can return them to you. Do you accept this?’

The bard no longer had a voice, and could only nod. In a breath, they were turned into stardust, and now they sing forever amongst the stars, reunited with their lovers for all eternity.’

The watchful eyes of those same stars look down on Sapnap now as the fire crackles. His stomach feels strange, like it'd been doing backflips while XD spoke. It could just be another effect of his voice though.

“Okay, new rule.” Karl claps, “No more stories from the peanut gallery.”

“Agreed.” Quackity and George say as one.

“I liked it.” Sapnap says with a frown.

“Of course you did.” Quackity pats his hand, “Something tells me you’re a sucker for a good tragedy.”

“Sapnap always got mad when true love’s kiss worked.” George whispers like a secret and Sapnap slaps at him while Karl laughs.

“How can someone as archetypically heroic as you hate archetypical endings, Sapnap?”

“I don’t!” Sapnap complains, “I’m just *saying*. True love doesn’t solve everything, okay?”

“Why not?” Karl bats his lashes, “Are you saying you wouldn’t kiss me if you stumbled upon my corpse in the middle of the forest, Sap?”

“No.” Sapnap wrinkles up his nose, “I’d take you to a *doctor*, Karl. Because that’s who’s in charge of that shit. Or a witch, if you were cursed. I’d fight a dragon, if that’s what I needed to do. But nothing in the world has ever been solved with nothing but a kiss.”

“Boo,” Karl complains, “Just let me live in bliss, can’t you?”

“No.” Sapnap crosses his arms.

“I think Sapnap is right.” Quackity breaks in, voice a little hesitant, “I mean...true love is nice and all, but, I dunno...I’d rather have someone who’s willing to fight my dragons than someone who thinks a kiss fixes everything.”

“*Thank you.*” Sapnap snags Quackity’s wrist and tugs gently, gathering Quackity into his arms when he comes willingly, “Quackity gets it. Come on, Big Q, we’re gonna chill by ourselves and let the romantics whine about curses.”

“Hey!” Karl immediately backtracks, “No, I get it. I’m on your side. Fuck true love! Hug me, too!”

“Just a second ago it was *Sapnap, your stories are bad and true love conquers all.*”

“I’ve learned! I have grown! The boy I was is the boy I no longer am!” Karl looks at them forlornly and the firelight and dark sky turn his big, puppy-dog eyes tragic and sad enough that Sapnap opens an arm up for him to dive under enthusiastically.

“Ahh, yes, this is the life.” Karl sighs, leaning back against Sapnap and twining an arm with Quackity, tangling their hands together, “Fuck love, you’re both right.”

“Fine, then,” George sniffs from his place within XD’s arms, “I’ll stick here with true love’s kiss. Fuck all three of you and your realism and cynicism. We don’t need that shit, right, XD?”

“**Yes, George.**” XD agrees, sounding amused.

“You *would* say that.” Sapnap rolls his eyes, “You’re whipped, dude.”

“I don’t know what that means.”

“Yes, you do, you fucking liar -”

“Don’t call him names, he’s sensitive!”

“He’s a demigod, George, he isn’t *sensitive* -”

“I’m sensitive, Sapnap. Please refrain from calling me names.”

“Oh, you fucker -”

“Sapnap, he asked to not be called names,”

“Don’t take his side, Karl! You’re on my side, remember!?”

“Oh yeah, heck, you’re right. Quackity has neutrality, doesn’t he? Q, weigh in here.”

“No, I’m staying out of it.” Quackity just hides his face in Sapnap’s cloak, eyes closing, “Wake me up when we go to bed.”

“Oh, Q, come on!”

“Shh, let him rest,”

“God, I hate all of you.” George complains and flops back against XD, “Except you, XD. You always have my back.”

“Of course, George.”

“See -”

The bickering lasts long into the night, as routine had slowly become. Sapnap gives XD first watch, as is the new normal, but they all end up staying up late, talking or catnapping or snacking on the last of the rabbit, telling stories from their youth or wherever the fuck XD is getting his.

Sapnap is going home, soon, but...but somehow, he sort of feels like - minus one glaringly missing piece - he's a little bit home already.

Sapnap has been to the Crimson Forest before. As a child, he'd visited the forest with his father: Skeppy interested in exploring the outer edges and neither he nor Bad trusting anyone else to watch their son while he was away and Bad was busy working. So, he'd gone with Skeppy, and they'd walked along the very edges of the swamp. Sapnap had heard screams and snorts - the piglin and the hoglin, but it hadn't been very scary, at the time. Nothing was going to hurt him, not with his father at his side.

This time, he doesn't have Skeppy or Bad to keep him safe. It's just him, and three humans, and a demigod, standing at the end of the swamp on the opposite side from where he once stood, listening to those same sounds.

Karl's been gripping his hand tightly since they first started hearing the screaming about an hour ago, and Quackity and George have progressively grown quieter as they approached. All five of them are silent now, standing in a line just outside of the first red tree.

The trees grow red in the Crimson Forest. Most things grow red in the Crimson Forest; even the fog, low to the ground and covering every inch of earth within, sparkles a pale, sickly pink. Trees grow thick and tall, giant fungi springing forth nearly as high as the branches blocking out the sun except for stringy, weak light that breaks through. The vines of the forest are alive, Sapnap remembers his father mentioning once, and are willing to snatch inattentive travelers. Tribes of piglin live within, family groups and sometimes small communities that hunt the wild striders and hoglin, and whatever else they happen across, or so the rumor goes. Within the center of the forest lies a fire swamp, pools of roiling lava and the occasional, rare spring of water so hot it bubbles constantly, ready to sear flesh from bone in an instant.

He's explained all of this in the time they've been traveling, wracking his brain for every iota of trivia his parents had imparted, every rumor or fact he'd picked up during his life. Still, only these facts come to mind, even standing before the whispering red of the Crimson Forest.

“Ready?” He looks down the line, squeezing Karl's hand comfortingly, “We won't be taking as many breaks. We're going to try to reach the swamp by the end of the third day. I'll lead with Karl, XD will be protecting our backs. George, Quackity, you stay in the middle. I want sword and bow drawn the entire time. If you see something, say something - I don't care if it's only a bunny.”

“Okay.” George nods, unwilling to argue. He's already sweating, the heat of the forest nearly as hot as the jungle in midday. It may be cooler under the trees, but Sapnap doubts it. It's warm even to him. He's worried about the three of them, worried there won't be enough water for the five-day

trek they're about to make.

He's worried about a lot of things. Wilbur and his brothers haven't reappeared yet, but Sapnap doesn't doubt that they'll bring Techno with them next time, now that they know how powerful XD is. If they can get past the swamp, officially cross the border into the Badlands, they'll be safe. He just has to get them there before Wilbur catches up again.

"Let's just go!" Karl shouts, breaking the somber silence and taking a step forward. He drags Sapnap, who drags Quackity, who drags George, who drags XD - and they're off, a chain of nervous travelers just looking to escape.

"I'm dying." Karl gasps, sitting down woozily. He's been practically unconscious against Sapnap's back for the last hour, only stepping where he's dragged and breathing hard against his shoulder blades. Sapnap would have pushed him off, if only to save him from Sapnap's body heat, but Karl isn't joking around and Sapnap is genuinely worried. Karl had even stripped off his cloak and stuffed it into the enderchest, which XD had taken from Sapnap so he could help Karl.

Night was beginning to fall and Sapnap had called for a halt, whereupon Karl had peeled himself from Sapnap. Quackity isn't in much better condition. The more uncomfortable he is, the quieter he becomes and he's grown silent in the last hour, too.

"Shirts off." Sapnap orders, stripping his shirt off and using it to fan Karl and Quackity as best he can, "Lay on the ground, okay? George, you, too. I don't want anyone to get heatstroke."

"I'm okay." George says, like he isn't sweating through his shirt. XD shuffles him over, though, and he joins Karl and Quackity in pulling his shirt off. Quackity lays on his stomach, wings limp and twitching faintly, fidgeting and fluttering over his shoulders. Karl blinks lazily, cheeks flushed so red he almost looks sunburnt. Sapnap uses their extra waterskin to wet clothes and carefully lays them over each of their faces or the back of the neck, in Quackity's case.

"XD, fan them," He orders, handing his shirt off to XD, who does as told without question. He won't get tired, so Sapnap leaves him to it and sets up camp. He puts the tent up over top of them, gets them all in the hopefully-cooler shade before he even bothers with a perimeter, accustomed to mobs avoiding XD whenever possible. He doesn't bother with torches, knows that light doesn't scare away the creatures that haunt this forest. They're lucky, he can admit, that they have XD to act as a repellent. No bandits will haunt this forest, and they'll hear piglin long before they see them - for now, he wants the lot of them to stay under the tent and just catch their breath.

"M okay." Karl eventually slurs, voice weak, "M okay, really. 'M fine."

"Just rest." Sapnap pushes Karl's bangs out of his face, slicking back his sweaty hair, "It's okay. You're all doing great. I know it's hot. Q, angel? You still with me?"

"Mhm." Quackity nods, arms bent and hands laced together and resting on his head. "Just hot. Itchy."

"I'll bet." Sapnap runs a soothing hand down his back, his skin slick with sweat. "Is it your wings?"

"God, I want to rip them off." Quackity admits, which means they're fucking awful. Sapnap winces in sympathy.

"How can we help?"

Quackity shakes his head and Sapnap lets him be with a pat, gives him time to think while he checks on George. XD hasn't stopped fanning and even Sapnap can appreciate the breeze he's creating with Sapnap's shirt. George is handling the heat better than Karl and Quackity, sitting up with his eyes closed and his face tilted toward XD to get the most of the warm breeze. Sapnap leaves him to it, knows better than to try to get George to talk when he's uncomfortably hot. It's a good way to get his head bitten off and he doesn't want the heat to make tempers worse than usual.

He checks back in with Quackity, who's tilted his face a bit so he can see Sapnap with his blue eye.

"D'you think..." Quackity swallows nervously, shifting up and onto his knees. The cloth slips from his neck but he holds it in his hands, twists it. "D'you think you could, um...uh..."

"Whatever you need." Sapnap says seriously.

"My wings." Quackity glances away and then back up to Sapnap, "They're...they'll feel better. I mean, if we...If you...preen them."

Karl sits up so fast his cloth flies off his face, landing in his lap with a wet *splat*.

"Quackity." He says, voice soft and a little wondrous, "You..."

"Don't make it a big deal." Quackity practically begs, "It's just - it's uncomfortable. And I can reach them, but it won't be done *properly*, you know, so -"

"Q." Sapnap reaches forward and takes Quackity's hands in his, squeezing them solidly, "Do you really want that? For us to fix your wings?"

"I..." Quackity looks at their hands, something in his eyes shifting, breaking, maybe, before they flood with tears. "Yeah." he sniffs, "Yes. I do. I want you to fix them, please. Karl, you - you, you can help. If you want."

"Of course, baby." Karl nods seriously, "Yes, of course, yes. Anything you want. Anything. Does this mean...? What we talked about...?"

"Yeah." Quackity clears his throat, blinking rapidly, "Yeah, you're - you were right, this is - I want this. I want this so much. More than I'm worried about - about that. You're right."

Sapnap feels like he's missing something, something big, maybe something from the last time they were left alone at camp. But he can ask later, worry later. For now, Quackity has tears in the corners of his eyes. He reaches forward and wipes them away with a thumb, smiling reassuringly when Quackity looks at him with a wide, watery stare.

"Whatever you want. Whatever you need." Sapnap repeats.

"We'll give you guys some space." George says quietly, voice nearly silent. Sapnap would argue, wants to keep George under the shade of the tent, but he wants Quackity to be comfortable, too. George has XD to care for him, and Sapnap doesn't usually like to rely on that thought, but he will, for now.

"Be careful." He warns, just to be safe, and George smiles at him - fond, knowing, a little proud, somehow, and ducks out of the tent with XD, leaving the three of them alone.

"Okay." Sapnap rubs his hands together, "How do we do this? What's most comfortable for you, Quackity?"

“Uh,” Quackity shifts awkwardly. “Not on my stomach, please.”

“Of course. Sitting up?”

“Yeah.”

“And...and I need to see you. One of you. Someone needs to - I dunno. Hold my hands, probably. Sorry.”

“Don’t apologize.” Karl says firmly and sits in front of him, hands out for Quackity to take. “I’ll be here, okay? While Sapnap straightens them out.”

“Okay.” Quackity agrees, voice tiny. He shifts until he’s sitting cross-legged, Karl in front of him, his back and wings exposed to Sapnap. Vulnerable, unbearably shy, but trying to be brave for them.

Sapnap blinks back tears himself. He doesn’t know Quackity’s past, but he remembers the panic, the scars, the *fear*. He remembers Quackity begging for someone to not hurt him anymore, remembers Karl breaking down about it, remembers the rage he’d felt when he’d had to sew up Quackity’s wings and listen to him beg for Sapnap to stop hurting him. He doesn’t know what Quackity’s gone through, who the last person to touch his wings was and what they’d done - but he knows what *he’ll* do, and that is to make sure that Quackity makes every decision about this going forward.

“If you want me to stop,” Sapnap says seriously, settling both hands on Quackity’s bare sides, letting him feel Sapnap’s sincerity through the touch, “Just say the word. One word, and we’re done. Okay?”

“Okay.” Quackity nods shakily. Sapnap can feel him tremble under his hands. “Do you know what you’re doing?”

“Not a clue.” Sapnap admits and it makes them both laugh.

“Just...” Quackity inhales slowly and exhales steadily. Sapnap recognizes the pattern. “Gentle. Please. Be gentle, and you just...straighten them out. If any are broken or...or loose, you can wiggle them a little. If they’re bad, they’ll fall out, so you don’t have to tug. Please don’t tug on them.”

“I won’t.” Sapnap promises, “Not a single tug.”

“And if he does, I’ll give him the ol’ one-two.” Karl speaks up, voice jokey, but Sapnap hears the promise in his words.

“Ready?” Sapnap slowly slides his hands up Quackity’s back, stops them on the spot between where both his wings start, where skin molds into feathers.

“Mhm.” Quackity practically whimpers, the shaking subsiding only a little. Sapnap frowns, leans forward to press his forehead to Quackity’s shoulder and breathes with him slowly.

“Hey.” He says gently. “Karl and I are here, angel. You’re safe. Nothing is going to touch you right now. Do you believe me?”

Quackity sobs, just once, and nods. “I know. I know.”

“Okay,” Sapnap says, and gently runs the very tip of his fingers through his left wing. There’s a short gasp, then Karl’s voice, soft, “You’re okay, baby, you’re doing so good.”

The feathers underneath his touch are soft, softer than he would have ever guessed. He can feel where some of the undergrowth has got itself stuck, where feathers are twisted and turned sideways, and it is with all the care in the world that he works his way through it, the most sensitive feathers first. Underneath it all, he can still feel the puckered skin of scars, the silky down growing to replace the old feathers. Up close, he can truly marvel at the colors of Quackity's wings; without any blood, they are as bright as a sunrise and just as intricate, shifting slowly back into their proper place.

Sapnap can feel the moment that Quackity melts into his touch. It starts slow, in how his breathing turns slow and even, like he's about to sleep. His shoulders stop their trembling and Karl's voice shifts, ever so slightly to, "That's it, that's wonderful, that's perfect." The wings, of their own accord, spread out further, allowing Sapnap to reach into the creases and bends of them and smooth them over. A few feathers litter the ground under him, but true to his word, he doesn't pull a single one. There are a few that he can tell are on the verge, but he won't risk accidentally hurting Quackity.

It feels like he reaches the edges of the wing all too soon. The difference between it and the still unpreened wing is stark; he doesn't know how Quackity could stand it.

"Here," He says, clearing his throat as he does so, "Q, do you want Karl to -?"

"Yes," Quackity says, the first words he's uttered this entire time. "Yes, please."

Sapnap runs his fingers over the wing, one last time, only the slightest brush of skin on feather, but Quackity shivers anyway.

"Sorry," He apologizes immediately, shifting around so that he can take Karl's position in front of Quackity.

"No," Quackity says, shaking his head, his voice slurring slightly, " 'S okay. 'S good."

Now that Sapnap is there, and Quackity has a death grip on his hand, he can see the creeping exhaustion in Quackity's face, the way he's blinking as if to keep himself awake. There are still tears beading at the corners of his eyes, and Sapnap wipes them away with a gentle hand.

"Hey, angel," He says, and Quackity's lips tug upwards into a sweet smile, "Can you look at me?"

"If you call me that," Quackity says, sleepily, "I'll do anything you want."

Sapnap chuckles softly, and waits for Quackity's gaze to meet his. He doesn't need to see Karl to know he starts to work his way through the right wing. He's watching Quackity and he can see the moment clear as day. Quackity's eyes dilate, go soft, unfocused but not in the way that means he's slipped into another memory. It's vulnerability, pure and simple, letting the nesting instincts of an avian take over and leaving him calm and yielding, Sapnap realizing like a punch to the gut, because he's *safe*.

There are more hybrids in the Badlands and Kinoko than anywhere else, and he remembers Bad sitting down with him talking him through the different people he was going to help represent by being a knight of Kinoko. He had remembered parts of it before, but this was different. This was preening. For an avian, wings weren't just a limb, another part of their body. For avians, it was almost an extension of their very being.

Fuck, now Sapnap is going to cry. He hadn't realized, when he was running his fingers over Quackity's wings, exactly how important it was. Hadn't realized Quackity was entrusting him with

his very soul.

“Q,” Sapnap says, valiantly holding back tears, “Angel, you doing okay?”

Quackity hums in assent, blinking slowly as he tries to focus on Sapnap.

“How do you feel?” He prompts, watching as those beautiful eyes, now so utterly open and trusting, finally land on him.

“...Goopy,” Quackity says, eventually, blinking as Sapnap laughs quietly, “Like a marshmallow.”

“I’ll get you all the marshmallows you want when we’re at the house, okay?” Sapnap promises.

“Mhm,” Quackity says, “Been so long...”

“Since you had a marshmallow?”

“...No,” Quackity sighs as Karl finally extracts a particularly tangled burr from the bush they’ve been pushing through, “Since I was preened.”

Sapnap swallows past the lump in his throat, “Is it nice?”

Quackity sounds entirely overwhelmed when he answers, “S so good.”

“Good,” Sapnap repeats, rubbing circles into the back of Quackity’s hands.

It seems like an eternity and also no time at all when Karl says, careful, “There. All done.”

Without the constant sensory input setting off his wings, Quackity’s instincts will probably recede. But Quackity’s already looking so tired, Sapnap thinks he’ll probably go straight to sleep. He’s proven right when, the moment Karl’s hands leave his wing, Quackity slumps forwards into his arms, his wings shaking out some of that built-up tension with a small puffing up of feathers that leaves Karl giggling and loose down flying up into the air.

Quackity isn’t normally this touchy, but he snuggles into Sapnap’s chest with a contented sigh, and, well, who is Sapnap to deny him?

“I’ve got you, angel,” He says into Quackity’s hair, watching as his eyes flicker shut, sleep taking hold of him immediately. Karl comes to sit on his other side, bracing Quackity where he’s started to slip off of Sapnap’s lap, securing him in both of their arms, none of them minding the heat. “We’ve got you.”

He’ll move them, in a minute. It’s too hot to sleep like this, especially for Karl, who seems particularly weak to it. So he’ll give them all a minute. Just a minute.

Something’s changed in the morning and it isn’t the approaching fire swamp. Quackity wakes up, ever so slightly bashful at how easily he fell into the nesting instincts, but with a brighter smile and a stronger stride than the previous day. Karl, too, seems lighter, a weight lifted from his shoulders, and he nudges Quackity more often than ever; with an elbow, to get his attention, with a shoulder when he’s tired, with his foot when he wants to try and prank him.

George waggles his eyebrows at Sapnap behind their backs. Sapnap just flips him off. He isn’t entirely sure what *this* is, but he knows he wants it. Karl and Quackity, and however they want him in return.

Karl lags by the end of the day again, but his spirits are so high that he's still humming as Sapnap physically carries him on his back, pointing out which direction they need to go through the exhaustion in his voice.

They all sleep in the tent again, XD taking watch all night. Sapnap apologizes, quietly, in the morning but XD just shakes his hooded head, carefully placing a hand on Sapnap's shoulder.

"I want to protect you." XD intones, his voice ringing in Sapnap's ear. **"All of you."**

"All that humanity training is working, huh?" Sapnap tries not to choke, throat tightening.

"Yes." XD says seriously.

Sapnap scoffs, but he's fighting back a smile as they pack up camp and continue on.

They find the fire swamp on the third day, just as Sapnap had hoped they would.

The dry heat becomes humid, bubbling lava and steaming pools of water - so hot even Sapnap wouldn't survive a dip - filling the air with pops and hisses. There are no trees, only the red vines creeping over the cracked, dry earth. In the distance, Sapnap can see striders slowly wandering away from their group as they bring XD closer.

"Prime." Karl says, sounding ill. When he staggers, Quackity is already at his side to catch him. "Let's hurry."

"It should only take a few hours." Sapnap tries to appease him, "Just - hold on, okay?"

"I'll do my best." Karl wipes his brow, stands up straight with Quackity's help, and the five of them begin their journey.

XD stops floating forty minutes in. Sapnap wouldn't have noticed, except he hears George's quiet check-in.

"You're okay, XD?"

"Yes, George." XD says, voice devoid of emotion, **"I am not fond of fire."**

"Oh." George trails off and grabs XD's hand. Sapnap continues forward. He'd pick up the pace to get them through this place faster, except Karl is already staggering just a little and Quackity and George aren't doing much better.

They make it another hour, the tips of the other side of the swamp just maybe coming into view through the shimmering heat waves, before XD starts to list to the side.

"XD!"

"XD, are you okay?"

"Fuck, man, hey, don't fall over here, there's fuckin' lava, dude!"

Sapnap turns around in time to see George catch XD as he starts to fall, only feet from a pool of lava. Sapnap moves quick, snatches XD's cloak and yanks him hard in the opposite direction, nearly knocking both him and George onto the gravelly path. Still, it's better than the pool they'd almost dipped into.

"You could have mentioned," Sapnap looks down at XD, unimpressed, "That a little heat was

enough to knock you out, dude.”

“**I’m fine.**” XD says, sounding absolutely not fine.

“Uh-huh.” Sapnap sighs. “Sure you are, bud. Okay. Up. Get up.”

“Just let him rest -” George starts, worried, but Sapnap waves him off.

“We don’t have time to rest. Get up, mask man, come on,” Sapnap bullies XD back onto his feet, much to George’s disapproval.

“Sapnap,” George starts, but trails off when Sapnap kneels in front of XD and looks over his shoulder.

“Come on,” Sapnap sighs, “We don’t have all day. Get on.”

“**I’m fine, Sapnap.**”

“Get on or I’ll throw you over my shoulder like a sack, fucker.” Sapnap glares over his shoulder, “Hurry up.”

“Just get on, XD.” George orders, pushing at his arm, “Not even you would end up okay if you fell into lava.”

“**But...**” XD starts to protest again, until George shoves at him. He falls forward, nearly flattening Sapnap under him.

“Not,” Sapnap grits, “What I *meant.*”

It takes a second - XD has a body under all that cloak, it’s just a matter of Sapnap finding it and positioning him the way he needs to be positioned. Eventually, he gets it, though, with George’s help to shove all the cloak aside. When he stands up, XD is heavy but not impossible to carry. He can do this for an hour or two, if he thinks of it like training.

XD’s mask is somehow icy cold against Sapnap’s neck. This close, Sapnap can hear the quiet, rasping breaths. XD must have been dying under all the clothes and the mask.

“Fucking idiot.” Sapnap says under his breath and pretends the swell of fondness isn’t there.

He only, unfortunately, ends up carrying XD for close to another forty minutes before there’s a distant rumble that makes him pause. Even over the ambient noise of the swamp, he identifies the sound of hooves relatively quickly.

“Fuck.” he has time to say before he spots them in the distance, gaining fast from the direction their little group was escaping. “*Fuck.*”

“**Put me down.**” XD pushes weakly at his shoulders, “**I must fight.**”

“XD, no! Just - everyone, run!” George yells, and then takes off. Sapnap has no choice but to follow, hindered by XD as he is. Karl and Quackity pass him quickly, their gasping breaths covering the echoing hoofbeats as Sapnap focuses in on them.

They make it - almost. They’re so close. The trees are getting bigger. They just have to make it past the line, if they make it into the tree line, they can claim clemency and Wilbur will have to let them go or face starting a war with the Badlands. They just have to make it to the -

He sees George nearly reach the tree line and then -

Karl falls.

“Karl!” Quackity shouts, immediately coming to a halt only meters behind George at the treeline. He runs back, drops to his knees at Karl’s side as Karl weakly pushes himself up. He’s sweating so hard that his hair is wet and dripping. Even as he sits up, he sways and heaves.

“Run.” Sapnap hears Karl choke out, “I can’t - run, Quackity, run, don’t let them catch you -”

“I’m not leaving you.” Quackity shakes his head, turning to look up at Sapnap, still dragging XD along, “S-Sapnap!”

“Go!” Sapnap orders, “I’ll get him, *go*, get to the trees!”

Quackity shakes his head, ducking under Karl’s arm and bodily lifting him, “I’m not fucking leaving you. Either of you!”

“Guys!” George calls from the treeline, “Guys, they’re coming! It’s fucking *Wilbur!*”

“*Run, George!*” Sapnap shouts, gritting his teeth. He thinks, for just a fraction of a second, of dumping XD and running, lifting Karl and Quackity over his shoulders and bolting - but he throws the thought out before it’s even finished forming. He’s changed a lot in the last months. Grown colder, less able to smile and laugh, less able to choose what he thinks is right over what he knows he has to do. But this - abandoning a friend, it’s a choice. It’s a choice he can’t make again. Will never make again.

George runs, but not in the direction Sapnap wishes he would. He runs back, joins the four of them and ducks under Karl’s other arm.

“They’re after you,” Karl shakes his head, limp between the two of them, “They’re after you, George, you can’t -”

“Shut up.” George grunts, he and Quackity lugging Karl forward, only steps ahead of Sapnap, “Shut up, just walk. I can’t leave you, either, *idiot!*”

“My prince!” Wilbur suddenly shouts, and though his voice is faint, it gets louder from behind them, taunting, “My liege, my once and future lord, we’ve returned!”

“And we brought my other big brother, Sapnap!” Tubbo calls out, volume similarly increasing. “Hey, let me at that green fuck, the one who *electrocuted Tommy!!*”

Sapnap glances over his shoulder, chest going cold when he sees them. There are five figures this time, all riding striders. Maybe those same striders XD had chased off days ago.

“We won’t make it.” Sapnap calls it, slowing to a stop. “XD. Can you fight?”

“Yes.” XD heaves himself off Sapnap’s back and Sapnap helps him, both of them panting.

“What do we do, Sap?” George asks tightly, “What do we -”

“Go.” Sapnap shakes his head, pointing at the trees, “Just get to the trees, all three of you. We’ll - we’ll hold them off, and you three run. Karl, you get everyone out of the forest. We’ll follow behind.”

“No.” Quackity says immediately, “No, fuck that, *fuck that*, we aren’t leaving you!”

“Quackity, I can’t lose -!” Sapnap starts, and then realizes that he doesn’t know which of them to say first. He can’t lose any of them. “I can’t lose you. I can’t lose any of you, and I can’t protect you, and *neither can XD*. Not against Technoblade. I need you to run.”

“No.” George carefully helps Karl to the ground, “Not a chance. They’ll take you. Take you both back to the castle, to the throne. It’ll *take you*, Sapnap, I’m not letting it. And there’s no telling what may happen to XD, being back there! No, no, *no*. I’ll throw us into the fire before I let that happen!”

“What,” Sapnap starts, even though this is absolutely not the time for it, “George, what do you mean, it’ll *take me* -”

“**George.**” XD stands up, straightens out to his full height. He isn’t floating, but he still towers over all of them. **“I’ll protect you, George. Go to the forest.”**

“Not a fucking chance.” George draws his bow and an arrow, notches and aims. “I’ll kill them before they take us.”

“George, don’t!” Sapnap tries to stop him but George looses his arrow first, aim fair and true.

If Technoblade weren’t leading the charge, it may have struck straight through his heart. He curves his strider at the last moment, lets the arrow dodge past him, the head simply skimming through his long, pink hair and taking a few strands with it.

“Oh, George!” Techno calls out, pulling his strider to a halt a short distance from them, “Is that how we greet old friends?”

“If you take one fucking step,” George says flatly, another arrow already notched, “I’ll take out your eyes, Technoblade.”

“Hey, don’t threaten me with a good time,” Techno, voice so monotone it’s hard to tell if he’s joking or not, hops off his strider. He steps forward and the next arrow flies, just as George promised. Techno barely dodges, blinking in surprise, as the arrow clangs against the golden crown on his head instead of straight through his eyeball. “Damn. You weren’t joking.”

“I’m still not.” George notches again, “Those were warning shots, Technoblade. Turn that animal around and *get lost*.”

“Now, we both know I can’t do that.” Techno finally stops smiling, looking serious. He paints a daring, terrifying picture in his crown and red, velvet cape, fur-lined, even. As a piglin, half-blooded or otherwise, he has just as much, if not more, resistance to the heat than Sapnap does and he wears it easily.

Wilbur and his brothers slow to a stop behind Technoblade, each of them dismounting with smug smirks that make Sapnap want to grit his teeth. At the very least, they all look wilted and exhausted from the heat.

“Technoblade.” Sapnap breathes out, “You can’t take him back.”

“Sorry, Sapnap.” Techno draws his sword. It’s only iron, chipped and scratched, but the edges stained pink with dried blood the sword had absorbed as its due. All of Technoblade’s weapons had that look. Used. “It’s not for fun anymore. Got my own reasons now, ‘n’ all.”

“**You will not touch them.**” XD summons his wooden sword, drawing it out from thin air the same as he puts it away. It crackles with enchantment, sizzling purple to match Nightmare, which

Sapnap draws.

“Wait a moment,” Wilbur comes to Technoblade’s side, leans over his shoulder and peers past XD and Sapnap and George, blinking a few times, “Wait a *moment*. Is that *Quackity*?”

“Wait, Big Q is here?” Tubbo asks.

“*The Big Q?*” Tommy comes to join Wilbur, peering behind him, Tubbo right behind him. They look like little nesting dolls, one just slightly bigger than the other all the way to the smallest.

“The whole castle’s abuzz about you, Big Q!” Wilbur smiles, slow and oily, “Oh, dear. Oh, dear, oh, dear, I wonder which rumor is true. Did you leave, Quackity? Did you run away, finally? Or are you playing the long con?”

“Shut up.” Quackity suddenly shouts, yanking George’s sword from his belt, “Shut *up*, shut up, I’m not - I’m *not* going back, shut up, don’t say another fucking *word*, Wilbur, I swear to every fuckin’ God in the pantheon -”

What? What? *What?* Sapnap wants to whirl around, wants to demand answers, but he can’t take his eyes off Technoblade, who even during all of this is watching George like a hawk. George hasn’t taken his eyes off of Technoblade either, arrow still pointed with deadly accuracy.

“Leave him...” Karl drags himself up by XD’s cloak, staggering, “Leave him...alone. Don’t talk to him.”

“Who are you?” Wilbur frowns thoughtfully, “I don’t know you. You’re new. Are you a friend of the throne or a friend of the crown?”

“No friend of yours.” Karl snaps, “Now leave us alone!”

“Hey,” Tommy glares, “Hey, mask fuck, you! You hit me with *lightning* last time, what the fuck was that about? What the fuck was that about, you fuckin’ bastard!?”

“**Leave.**” XD points his sword slowly at Technoblade, the biggest threat, “**Or forfeit your life.**”

“I don’t forfeit.” Techno casually swings his sword in his hand, entirely at odds with the threat in his voice. Wilbur only just ducks out of the way in time. Ranboo, who’d been peering quietly over Techno’s other shoulder, doesn’t move at all. Somehow, the blade avoids him.

“**Then die.**” XD says, a promise.

“I’ve been told I don’t do much of that, either.”

“Stay behind me.” Sapnap says, speaking over his shoulder so he doesn’t face away from the threat. Whatever Wilbur’s talking about, for whatever reason that he and Quackity know each other - Sapnap will figure it out later. They’ll talk. He won’t jump to conclusions, he won’t - he’ll listen. Later. For now, he has a bigger problem in front of him than Quackity’s past.

“Sapnap, be careful -” Karl starts to say, and then XD is no longer between them and Techno is no longer by his brothers.

They meet in the middle of their groups, a loud clash and creak of wood on iron. XD’s sword should, by all rights, have shattered under the blow of Techno’s but it stays ever-solid.

“Strong.” Techno says thoughtfully, “Who are you, man who controls lightning and wears a

smile?"

"None of your concern, man who wears an ill-fitted crown."

"Touché," Techno says with good humor and they break apart.

Sapnap would have taken the opportunity to turn and force his friends to the trees while Techno was distracted, but George turns his arrow from Techno to a new target just in time to stop Tubbo from bolting straight at them with an axe.

"Prime, you feral little monster." Sapnap can't help but shake his head, "What's crawled up your ass, huh? Can't you just leave us be?"

"Sorry, Sapnap," Tubbo frowns, "We'd like to 'n' all, 'cept Schlatt is gettin' out of control."

"Our *venerated* President is in quite a mood these days." Wilbur says severely, eyes flickering behind Sapnap.

He says it like it should mean something, looking serious and smug at the same time, but Sapnap lets the words roll off his shoulders. Wilbur likes mind games and he's *good* at them. Sapnap won't fall for anything he says. He can't afford to.

"We can't let you run around anymore, George. It's time to put your personal sacrifices aside and think of others." Wilbur continues, slowly aiming his crossbow. He barely has a chance to lift it to eye level before George shoots again and Sapnap watches with pleasure as Wilbur flinches back, George's arrow embedding itself into his crossbow with perfect precision. The string snaps, the wood splintering.

"You lot must think I'm joking around!" George snaps, angrier than Sapnap thinks he's ever heard him, "Do you honestly think I won't put the next one through your *smooth little brain*, Wilbur Soot? Or should I take one of your brothers out to prove myself!?"

"*Don't* threaten my brothers," Wilbur snarls, suddenly serious. He drops his crossbow to the ground, useless now, and draws a sword as George notches his next arrow, "You won't go through with your words, George. You're a coward. Always hiding behind Sapnap and Dream, always - *woah* -" Wilbur dodges George's arrow, grunts in pain when it finds a home in his shoulder, sharp point sinking deep into armor and flesh, "*FUCK*, that *hurt*, George!"

"Wil!" Tommy shouts, jumping between George and Wilbur with a swing of his sword, "Hey, you royal fuck! Leave him alone!"

"That's what I'm trying to get *you* to do!" George shouts, aggrieved, and then Tubbo rushes forward with a wild scream of attack. Sapnap finds himself facing Tubbo and Ranboo down at once, an axe and a blank-eyed enderman swinging his arms wildly.

"Two on one," he grunts, "Isn't *fair*, children."

"Life isn't fair, big man!" Tubbo smiles back, showing remarkably sharp teeth for being the same breed of hybrid as Puffy (Sapnap can't think about Puffy right now, still at sea, no fuckin' idea what's happened -). "Now fight us!"

Sapnap easily shoves him away, but only barely dodges Ranboo's next strike. As predicted, Ranboo leaves himself open for a fatal wound but Sapnap can't bring himself to take it. He remembers watching this fuckin' kid run around the castle, remembers *both* of them running around on one of Philza's visits, ducking behind and between his legs as they and Tommy chased

each other around. They'd loved climbing Dream like a tree because he was so tall, taller than Ranboo, even, as he was still so young.

He shoves him, too, instead, and feels Tubbo ram into his side with his horns. He feels a rib nearly give under the assault and gasps, taking a step back and kicking Tubbo hard enough to send him rolling.

"Q." He gasps out, "P-protect Karl."

"But -"

"Protect him!" Sapnap snaps, "And watch our backs, okay?"

"Okay." Quackity doesn't argue again, "I can do that."

"Be careful." Karl wheezes, "Sapnap, please, be careful."

Sapnap doesn't answer. He just swings, blocking Tubbo's next axe blow and grinding Nightmare's edge against it as he drops low and punches Tubbo in the chest as hard as he can. Tubbo bleats in shock and pain, curling in and rolling away with the punch.

"Hey!" Ranboo shouts, "Don't hurt him!"

"We're *fighting*, you fucking fool!" Sapnap shouts and punches him, too. Ranboo doesn't make a sound, just teeters back - right toward a lava pool. With a shout, Sapnap stretches forward, grabs him by his shirt collar and hurls him in the opposite direction, toward where Tubbo lay sprawled and breathing hard.

"Sapnap, they're just children!" Wilbur cries from his left and Sapnap has only a moment to lift Nightmare before Wilbur's sword comes down on him. One arm is useless, bleeding profusely from a wound where he'd stupidly ripped the arrow out.

"Then don't bring them into a fight," Sapnap hisses and kicks Wilbur in the knee hard enough that he hears a snap.

Wilbur screams, going down with it, but swipes his sword low and Sapnap barely has time to step out of the way, nearly losing a chunk of flesh to Wilbur's wild swing.

"That *hurt*," Wilbur complains again, slowly standing up - "Sapnap, you call us fools, but - look at your little party. Three strangers, no Dream. Pathetic. What has your little adventure become? Foxes in the hen house, that's what. Schlatt will find you, no matter where you go, and by then, it'll be too late for *everyone*."

"Shut up." Sapnap lifts Nightmare, hears Tommy's loud shouting as George makes him dance with arrows. He checks in on XD and sees him and Techno bracing blades again, but Techno's been pushed back nearly past the striders, closer to a lava pool. He might catch fire, but he'd be fine if he fell in and the others helped. It would give Sapnap and their group time to run.

They're so close to the trees.

"Sapnap, pay attention!" He hears Quackity scream, and then has to duck hard and slam himself into the ground to avoid Tubbo's axe.

"So close!" Tubbo whines, "Why'd you *move*, Sapnap!?"

Sapnap doesn't answer. He just flips Nightmare in his hands so he's holding it by the blade and swiftly swings it up. He doesn't often use his sword like a blunt object but he does so now, knocking the hilt into Tubbo hard enough that *he* hears Tubbo's brain rattling around.

Almost immediately, Tubbo goes limp to the ground.

"Oh fuck, Tubbo!" Ranboo shouts, dropping next to Tubbo and carefully tilting his head. Sapnap's stomach drops - he'd lost control, he'd used too much strength, fuck.

"Tubbo -" He starts, dropping Nightmare to point at the ground and stepping forward to check on him.

"Sapnap!" Quackity and George yell at once and he snaps to attention, turns wildly to see Wilbur coming at him with a look of deadly seriousness, sword raised and falling fast. He doesn't have time to bring Nightmare up fully, just enough to hopefully not be beheaded -

An arrow pings off Wilbur's blade, throwing him off balance. He falls to the side with a shout and Sapnap barely has a moment to be relieved before he notices the dead silence that has fallen over the battle.

He turns to George.

George blinks at him, fingers still up from when he'd released his arrow to save Sapnap.

"Sap." He says, "You're okay."

"George." Sapnap says, unable to say another word as his eyes widen, his heart dropping into his stomach.

"G-George." Tommy echoes in horror. His sword, bloodied, drops to the ground.

George's hand comes to and then away from his chest. Blood drips onto the cracked dirt beneath him. He opens his mouth, a silent *oh*, and then he falls to his knees.

Karl just catches him before he hits the ground, but the expression in his eyes is terrified as he presses his hands to George's chest and it does nothing to stop his shirt being stained red.

"Oh fuck," Tommy says, once, an aborted motion to move forward, "Oh fuck, *George* -"

Any apology, anything that might have been a regret is cut off by the scrape of wood against gem, a horrid scraping sound that mingles with Tommy's terrified yelp and XD's enraged scream of "**GEORGE!!!**"

There is a whirl of forest green as XD practically flies across the battlefield, in front of Techno one second and in front of Tommy within that same second. Suddenly, the air is filled with the stink of fear, so intense that it overpowers even the sulfur and burning of lava.

"WILBUR!" Tommy screams as he falls back, Wilbur wielding the very same sword that almost struck Sapnap down coming to his aid. Wilbur is blown back by some invisible force almost immediately. XD has to barely move a muscle as he sends the man flying back and into a large rock. Ranboo lets out a screech that's more ender than man, sprinting for Tommy, only to go by way of Wilbur into the very same rock. The two of them crumple into a pile, and lie still. Blood trickles down Ranboo's face, and Sapnap feels sick.

XD swings his sword and Tommy barely manages to dodge, rolling in the dirt with a shriek of

genuine fear as he tries to escape the demigod, and Techno is running to try and help Tommy but - Sapnap is frozen, between his friend on one side and a child on the other.

He needs to get that healing potion, for George. He needs to grab the enderchest still on XD and pull the potion out and save George. He can hear those horrifying gurgles of someone breathing in their own blood, and he knows that they don't have long. He can hear Karl talking to George, Quackity pulling at Sapnap's sleeve and saying something he can't hear.

A few meters away, Tommy trips, his sword flying out of his grip. XD does not stop his advance.

"I didn't mean -" Tommy says, pleading, and Tommy has never begged anyone in his entire life, "Please, I didn't mean - **TECHNO!**"

XD's sword goes up, and Techno shouts, "**TOMMY!**" - despair etching the line of his words, the first time Sapnap has ever heard him so desperate, because he knows, the same as Sapnap does, that he won't make it in time.

In a perfect arc, the blade swings down.

Tommy holds his hands above his head, bracing for the blow that will end his life.

Wood meets netherite in a clash that should have utterly destroyed XD's sword. Sapnap knows the wooden sword is stronger than it has any right to be, but even a godsword will meet its match against netherite.

In his hand, Nightmare sings.

"It was an *accident*, he's just a *kid!*" Sapnap snaps out, "XD, stop fighting and get us the hell out of here!"

XD *snarls*, an anger that he's never shown before as he pulls back the sword, aiming for Sapnap's left only for him to parry the blow. "**He hurt George!**"

"He's a kid, we've got a potion, just STOP!" Sapnap pushes up and back, trying to drive XD as far away from Tommy as possible, "We have to go, XD!"

"NO!"

"I won't let you hurt him," Sapnap says, determined, as XD gears up for one more strike.

"**Then,**" XD says, low and dangerous, "**Then you pay the price.**"

He expects XD to swing immediately. Sapnap's entire body is tense, coiled, Nightmare ice-cold in his hand, ready to strike and parry the being that had once been his ally. He expects the hit.

He doesn't expect the sword to falter, a split second of hesitation, not when XD has had eyes for George and George alone.

"Sapnap." XD slowly lowers his head, shakes it. "**I can't - Not, not you, Pandas, I-**"

A tearing, ripping noise splits the air; the sound of steel through flesh, followed by a punched-out gasp that is all air, a blade in the back. A sword slides to a stop a millimeter from Sapnap's face. He blinks, staring incredulously at the blade currently dripping blood onto his clothes. XD's lungs heave through the sword that has pierced them, and wet crimson spreads from the gaping wound in

his sternum. Behind him, Techno draws back the sword, a blank determination in his eyes.

XD inhales, a sharp, rattling thing that bounces around the new space in his lungs, and collapses to the ground.

Funny. Sapnap never thought of XD as having lungs before. Somehow, he didn't expect him to bleed the same as everyone else.

From behind him, he can hear the sound of Tommy scrabbling up and away.

"XD," George says weakly from Karl's arms. He feebly lifts an arm and it drops as he reaches for XD. "X-XD..."

"G-George -" XD's cloak goes limp, as if his magic simply ceases to work. Without it, his hood falls and his mask, knocked askew as he drags his face from the dirt, tilts so that the crossed-out eyes and grinning mouth are off-balance. XD's arm reaches out to the man dying in Karl's arms.

He's trying to speak through a punctured lung and the words whistle and die in his throat like a balloon losing air. It's familiar. It's *familiar*. The air does not ring with this voice. Sapnap can hear it clearly.

"George," XD says again, choking down blood, "Take my hand."

Sapnap realizes what is about to happen a second before it does.

He grabs Quackity's hand and lunges.

"Karl!" He calls, helpless; he thinks they are too far, that he won't be able to grab hold in time. Karl reaches out to them, eyes so wide they look ready to pop out of his head. Sapnap can't reach, he can't, but he has to - he has to, to stay with George and Karl and XD, so he reaches out with one hand as far as he can go and holds onto Quackity as tight as he can -

He feels the slide of Karl's hand in his as Karl practically leaps forward to meet him just as the world turns inside out.

Far more slapdash than before, the teleport feels like he's been thrown in the middle of a river of rapids and sharp rocks. Sapnap hits the ground with enough force to bruise, but he barely has time to register it. He's already sitting up, glancing around as he barks out, "Enderchest, NOW!"

He knows these sounds. He knows these trees - birch trees, they only grow in a specific part of Kinoko, they only grow in a specific part of Kinoko barely a week's travel from the capital but he doesn't have time to think about that, about - fucking fucking *fuck*, about how he knows these woods, knows that after all of this, they've just lost all the fucking progress they made, *fuck* -

"Quackity, put pressure on here," Karl says, raspy and panting, shifting and wincing as George lets out a low whine of agony as he is moved, "Quickly!"

Quackity blinks rapidly - *shock*, Sapnap thinks - before doing as he is told, ripping from Sapnap's hold to fall onto George. In moments, his shaking hands are completely crimson.

Sapnap dives for XD, practically shoving him over to reach the enderchest with all the fury of a starving man at a buffet. He doesn't care that he's tearing through months worth of supplies, doesn't care that this might be all they have for the journey ahead. All he cares about is that damn healing potion. XD holds completely still, limp, blood pooling, as Sapnap jostles him.

He doesn't even have the energy for a shout of victory as his hand closes around the small, round bottle. It's pink and fizzing, and George's eyes widen when he sees it.

"Wait," He struggles, "XD -"

"Shut the fuck up and drink the fucking potion."

George drinks the potion. His hands are trembling, and tears mix with the blood on his face, but slowly, the vibrant energy is gone from the bottle and sparks of dull purple magic dance around the edges of the wound. It goes right across his chest, and Sapnap refuses to look away as the skin starts to stitch itself back together with agonizing slowness. It will scar. The skin puckers and reddens, but the bleeding has stopped. It will be sore, and tender and George shouldn't put too much strain on it for some time but none of that really matters. It's closed. He's alive.

They're exhausted, covered in blood and sweat and dirt, they're all probably in shock and suffering from heat exhaustion, but none of it matters because George is going to live. He's going to be fine.

Sapnap is on the verge of letting out a shaking breath of relief when George jerks upwards.

"XD!" He cries, and this time, Sapnap cannot divert him.

Next to them, XD is curled on the ground, piled where Sapnap's dive for the enderchest had left him. He is trembling, and looks so small, so utterly helpless that Sapnap cannot help but feel the bottom drop out of his stomach.

His breath is still rasping, rattling those not-so hollow bones, catching in his teeth as he coughs, wet and guttural. If he was a normal human, he would already be dead. But as Sapnap looks down, at the gaping wound left behind by Techno's sword, he can see strings of flesh starting to knit back together, sliced bones reforming. Nausea churns in his stomach, but that doesn't seem to deter George. He rushes forward clumsily, even as he stumbles from the leftover pain, and pulls XD into his lap. His hands are slick with blood, but he clearly doesn't care as he pushes back the green hood completely off the demigod. The mask stays in place, but with the hood swept back, it's just a mask. A mask on a very human-like face; tan skin turned tepid with blood loss, dirty blonde hair and shaking, gloved hands that come up to cup George's face.

"Are you okay?" George asks, "XD, are you alright, what can we do, tell me what I can do!"

"George," XD says, voice filled with longing and hope and loss all at once. Sapnap's breath catches in his throat, "I'm okay, I promise, George, I'll be fine. Are you alright? Have you been healed?"

"Yes, yes, I'm fine, XD, I'm fine," George says, hand carding through XD's hair; a familiar motion, a familiar scene, pale hand in blond hair, the same as Sapnap has seen a thousand times before, "You did it, you saved us."

"George," XD says again, sounding familiar and fond and like *home*, because Sapnap has heard that voice say that name like that a thousand times, even more than he's seen that hand in that hair, the way that voice wraps around George's name like George hung the moon, like he would do anything for him, like George's name belongs in his mouth and will find no destination more welcome.

He would know that voice anywhere, he thinks, his legs moving as if wading through the ocean, stumbling out of the reach of Karl and Quackity's hands. He would know that voice in waking, in sleeping; in death and at the very end of the world. He would know that voice, because he has

heard that voice a million times; yelled down from the rooftops, huddled under the blankets in winter, shouted across training grounds and cheering in victory, promising him that he would be safe. That's the voice of his first friend, his brother, the sword to his shield, the only person he's ever trusted to watch his back completely.

That's the voice he's been mourning for so long it feels like he's mourned longer than he's loved it.

Sapnap's heart stutters to a stop, his breath gone; he feels like he's been punched in the gut, dizzy and lightheaded because that voice... that voice is -

“Dream?”

Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

When we die, we come back different. Like, with greener eyes, or as some far off star
- a softer world

Chapter Notes

are you ready? cw: panic attacks, grief/mourning, implied major character death

Bad gets his position as ambassador of the Badlands when Sapnap is still fresh from the fire, skin sometimes still bursting into flames from lack of control. He's burnt his father's hands enough times that Skeppy wears his diamond gloves constantly just to avoid being scorched. It's normal for a fire demon his age, in the Badlands, at least. It's not normal in Kinoko, though, where the majority of citizens are human or animal-hybrid and not mob, and Sapnap is nervous about it when he finds out that he'll be the odd one out.

His dad says that he will become the prince's guard. The prince is four years older than him, his dad explains, making the prince at *least* eleven. That's pretty old to Sapnap. His dad tells him not to worry, though, because the prince isn't going to be Sapnap's only new friend. There's another boy, a human, that will be training alongside him so that, one day, they'll be the strongest pair in the entire world. They'll protect the prince together, brothers in arms, family.

"The three of you," Bad says patiently, Sapnap in his lap and Skeppy sleeping on his shoulder as the carriage moves over miles and miles of new, lush, green land untouched by the wilds of the Badlands, "will be inseparable. Life will be hard for you here, Pandas, I can't lie. But they'll make it all worth it."

Sapnap doesn't understand what that means, that life will be hard, until a squire touches him a few days after he's moved into the barracks and *screams* - screams so loud the entire barrack goes silent and watches as the squire howls and cries about his burnt palms and how Sapnap deliberately tried to set him on fire. Sapnap *hadn't* tried to deliberately set him on fire, he was just *still learning* temperature control. But no one will listen - because he's a demon, the commander says, and because he can't just *burn people*, so he's given laundry duty and no dinner.

He sits in a dark room that night, scrubbing dirty clothes in boiling water that had been cold when he'd started, crying so hard that steam has fogged the windows up, all alone, until the door creaks open and a blond-haired, tanned little face pops into view.

"Hi." the child, a boy, says, blinking at him, "Are you the fire demon?"

Sapnap sniffs, wiping his face rapidly with his shirt and nodding. "Yeah, so what?" He demands snottily, ready to fight. He only needed the one lesson to know not to trust anyone in this *stupid* castle. He's the only fire demon in the castle, except his dad, and he's *the* fire demon now. In the Badlands, he's just *a* fire demon. He doesn't think he likes the differences here.

“Hi,” the boy repeats, stepping into the room and closing the door quietly, “I’m Dream. We’re gonna be partners. Sorry I’m a few days late, we ran into a *lot* of skeletons.”

“Partners?” Sapnap blinks, his defenses falling at the word, “Who said?”

“Puffy said,” Dream starts, then interjects, “That’s my not-mom, Puffy. She isn’t my mom but she is. Sort of like my sister but more? But not a mom, so my not-mom. She’s a captain of the guard now. Anyway, Puffy said that I’m going to be getting a partner who’s gonna train with me to protect the prince. She said you’d be coming from the Badlands. That you’d be a fire demon.”

“I’m only half fire demon.” Sapnap explains with exhaustion. He wonders if he’ll have to say this for the rest of his life in this dumb little kingdom. He wouldn’t have to explain in the Badlands. His human appearance would have given it away, that he was Skeppy’s son as much as Bad’s. But in Kinoko, mixed blood didn’t matter as much - if one of your parents was a demon, then you were a demon. Someone had even told him they didn’t believe Skeppy was his father! Everyone was *mean* here, and cruel for no reason. Sapnap wants to go home, back to the Badlands, or at least he wants to go live with his parents again. He misses them, how his father would make up stories during dinner and how his dad would sit by his bed and talk to him softly until he’d fallen asleep. In the barracks, he sleeps in a cot shoved against the wall and no one has spoken to him except to tell him what to do in the days that he’s lived here. The other kids won’t play with him, either - especially not after today.

“Oh.” Dream smiles, “Okay. I’m fully human. We think. I don’t really know, Puffy just says I’m me and that’s all that matters.”

“M-my father’s fully human. Except for the diamond.” Sapnap offers shyly, unsure how to proceed when such a big smile is being aimed at him.

“Neat!” Dream comes closer, settles down next to him and pokes curiously at the water, yanking his finger back when it scalds him, “Wow, did you do that? Make the water hot?”

“Yes.” Sapnap says with hesitation, “On accident.”

“Neat!” Dream repeats. “What’s your name?”

“Pandas. Or Sapnap. Sapnap’s my name now, but it used to be Pandas, when I was a baby.” he pauses. “It’s a fire demon thing.”

“Oh, cool.” Dream smiles again, “Puffy called me all sorts of names before we settled on Dream. I was Clay for a bit because she says she found me in a bunch of clay, but then I was Duckling. I like Dream, though.”

“Dream’s cool.”

“Thanks!”

Dream helps him wash clothes until the entire pile is done. Sapnap doesn’t even ask, Dream just sticks his hands in the hot water even though he’d just yanked his fingers away a few seconds ago, and starts scrubbing.

“You don’t have to.” Sapnap sniffs, wiping his eyes and valiantly pretending not to have been crying.

“Shut up.” Dream doesn’t look up, which Sapnap is grateful for, brows furrowed in concentration, “Niki told me what happened. Punz is a bitch.”

“My dad says I’m not allowed to say that word.”

“He’s not *my* dad, so I can.”

“That seems fair.”

“Anyway, I know you didn’t mean to burn him. He shouldn’t have touched you. We’re not supposed to touch people without asking first. I think he deserved it, since he didn’t ask first.”

“He surprised me, is all,” Sapnap awkwardly shrugs, shoulders bowed in, “Sometimes I can’t control how hot I am.”

“That’s okay.” Dream flicks water at him and laughs when the droplets steam off his skin, “I think it’s cool. I won’t touch without asking first.”

“Thank you.” Sapnap says, feeling like someone *finally* understands.

They carefully hang everything up to dry once they’re done scrubbing and Dream talks the whole time, dragging Sapnap into telling him all sorts of things about himself and his family and the Badlands. Dream tells Sapnap about himself, too, though there isn’t much to say. He’s lived with his not-mom, Puffy, for as long as he can remember, but she always says she found him in mud and clay and just decided to take him in. Puffy’s going to be Captain of the Guard for the Queen and she chose Dream to be trained to one day protect the prince, since she knows how talented he is. Dream heard about Sapnap weeks ago, when he and Puffy were still traveling from the ocean, where Puffy had led a crew on a big ship for as far back as Dream can remember. Dream’s been excited to meet Sapnap since he heard about him, a guaranteed best friend for the rest of his life.

“I’ve never really had a friend before.” Dream admits, sounding shy for the first time.

“Me, either.” Sapnap finds that he’s smiling and can’t seem to stop.

“I guess we’re each other’s first friend, then?”

“Best friend.” Sapnap offers a hand and Dream takes it. Sapnap cools his skin as rapidly as he can so he doesn’t burn him, but Dream doesn’t seem to mind. Dream drags him out of the back room and toward where the important people sleep.

“We can’t go here.” Sapnap whispers, but still trustingly follows.

“Yes, we can.” Dream says confidently and stops in front of a door. “This is ours.”

“Ours?”

“Because we’re going to be the king’s guard.” Dream explains and opens the door into a little room. “We’re gonna live here until we’re old. Puffy told me so. You should have been here from the start, but the old Captain is a *dick* so you weren’t.”

“My dad said I can’t say that one either. It’s rude.”

“You can when you’re with *me*,” Dream grins, “I won’t tell. Best friend’s agreement.” He offers a fist and Sapnap bumps it with a grin.

The room is simple and unlike anything Sapnap has ever lived in before - much too bare to be anything like at home in the Badlands, much too private to be anything like sleeping in the barracks proper. It has two cots, neither any bigger than the one Sapnap has been sleeping in, and

nothing else going for it except a small fireplace and a small stack of wood. There are two simple sets of drawers, but no other furniture.

But Dream looks around, proud, and Sapnap looks at Dream, who had snuck in to help him wash clothes, and feels like he finally understands what his dad had meant. Dream goes to one set of drawers, opens the top one, and pulls out a whole ration of meat.

“Niki said they didn’t give you dinner.” Dream rolls his eyes, “So I stole this. Come eat it with me!”

Sapnap hesitates. His dad said stealing was wrong, no matter what his father whispered about doing when Bad’s back was turned. But Dream grins at him, and he’s *hungry*, and he *didn’t* mean to hurt the squire, so it was really mean to punish him for no reason.

He goes, and Dream sits next to him on a cot while he rapidly consumes the mutton, and chatters away. Dream never runs out of things to say, even while he’s eating. Sapnap, in turn, finds himself *wanting* to talk for the first time since his dad explained that he wouldn’t be living at home anymore. Dream has what feels like unending stories about the sea and his life on Puffy’s ship before he came to Kinoko and he doesn’t seem to mind that Sapnap doesn’t have many stories to tell in return; none as interesting as his, at least. They end up sleeping together on the cot, both leaning against the wall, their heads bowed together, snoring.

The next day, Dream marches right up to Punz, the squire who had yelled and complained about Sapnap burning his hands, and calls him names Sapnap has never heard before, not even when his dad wasn’t in the room and other adults started to talk to each other like Sapnap wasn’t visible. When Dream is sent to do laundry afterward, Sapnap quietly sneaks in to help.

“You didn’t have to.” Sapnap says, warming the water so Dream’s hands don’t get cold as they scrub.

“Best friends fight for each other.” Dream says seriously, “Of course I had to, it’s my duty!”

Sapnap smiles so hard the water boils and Dream whines until it’s cool enough to use again.

They’re inseparable from then on. On the day they begin their training to one day be the King’s guard, they pick up practice swords and cross blades. That becomes something that happens every day for the next decade. The routine settles in quickly. They go to classes together to learn maths and strategy and reading and writing and geography and manners and etiquette in the mornings, and then they spend all hours of the afternoon in the training fields or in the armory, learning every weapon at their disposal and training their bodies to handle the strain. In the evening, the two of them eat together and then play late into the night, sometimes with the others but always with each other, only to wake up the next morning and do it all again. Sometimes Bad or Puffy or Skeppy come to visit and they’re whisked away for some fun adventure (that’s usually when Skeppy comes, though) or to learn something cool (when Puffy visits) or to go on a trip to some new place (when it’s Bad).

Sapnap meets George two years after he meets Dream and what he’ll remember most, for the rest of his life, is the look of awe on Dream’s face, even while George looks them both over with disinterest from behind his mother. That expression must be practiced, because the Queen never looks anything but disinterested. They’d been training together for what feels like most of his life by then, the promise of actually *meeting* their prince on the second anniversary of their training start date fueling them both. They’d seen him, of course, but always from afar. He’d never looked their way before.

Sapnap has been curious and excited for the last week, to finally meet who will become their third, but Dream has been on a whole other level. He's always been a little besotted when talk of the prince comes up, something about seeing him on his first morning in the castle, Prince George standing in a garden just as the sun rose over the green trees.

"He'd looked like something out of a story." Dream had sighed, poking at his food with a distant smile.

"Okay." Sapnap had agreed and stolen his bread since Dream seemed disinterested in eating it.

"They're little kids." George wrinkles his nose up, looking up at his mom, the Queen, as the first thing he ever says in their presence, "I'm supposed to hang out with them *forever*?"

"Yes, George." The Queen pats his head absently, face turned away from them all and aimed, instead, back toward the way they'd come, at the throne room. "Now be a good boy and bond. I have to go back to my duties."

George doesn't complain. The three of them, and Bad, watch her leave the minor hall in silence, and then George turns back to them and frowns.

"You're both short and small. How are you supposed to protect me?"

"You're not any taller than us and you're *older*." Dream says immediately, smiling even wider, "Now hush. We've waited a long time to meet you, so at least wait a minute before ruining it. Let us enjoy this."

"You can't say that to me!" George scowls, "I'm the prince!"

"Okay," Dream smirks, the same way he always does when he has mischief in mind, before repeating, "Hush, my prince, we've waited a long time to meet you, so at least wait a minute before ruining it."

"Bad!" George complains immediately, turning to Sapnap's dad, "Make him stop!"

"Boys." Bad sighs, sounding fond, "Don't fight already. Sapnap, greet your prince."

"Hi." He waves awkwardly, shy. He has friends; Punz and Sam and Ponk, Alyssa and Callahan, Dream, and he wasn't shy with them. But George isn't a friend. Not yet, at least. He's just a stranger, though a stranger Sapnap has been excited to meet for a long time. This is supposed to be his best friend, besides Dream. The three of them are supposed to become inseparable. He'll be at George's side for the rest of his life. He hopes that George doesn't look so disappointed the *whole* time.

"Hi." George sighs, shoulders curving in, "I guess I'm stuck with you two, then."

"Guess so." Dream shrugs, sounding much too chipper about it, "My name's Dream. This is Sapnap. We're your knights."

"Not yet, you aren't." George scoffs, "Right now, you're just squires."

"Knight or no, I bet we could take you in a fight." Sapnap squints at him, "Your arms are like toothpicks."

"Hey! Bad!"

“Play nice, boys.”

“Okay.” Dream offers a hand to George, smiling big and bright, “We’ve got lots of time to get to know each other. It’s nice to meet you, Your Highness.”

George looks between Dream’s hand and his face, and then at Sapnap, before sighing again and carefully placing his hand in Dream’s.

“Don’t call me that.” George frowns. “Just George, from you two. If you’re gonna be my knights forever.”

“Okay.” Dream had agreed, “George.”

Looking back, Sapnap has never heard anyone say a name the way Dream said George’s, like a hug with words. He thinks, later, that it must really have been love at first sight, for Dream. But at the time, Sapnap just rolls his eyes and offers his hand, too. George takes it, just as reluctant as he was with Dream, and he and Dream drag George, kicking and screaming, into a friendship that would only grow as they got older.

The first time Sapnap makes George laugh, Dream sulks for a solid two hours. The first time Dream makes George laugh, he rides the high for a full two days.

“His laugh.” Dream sighs in his cot that night, mere weeks into knowing their prince, “Wow.”

“He sounds like a donkey.” Sapnap tries to reason with him, but Dream only giggles and hides his face in his pillow, so Sapnap lets him be. Sapnap will never admit it, not even on pain of death, but he’d liked George’s laugh, too, and he likes the way Dream glows with smug happiness and tries so hard to pull the sound out of their dour, lonely prince as often as possible.

George softens, eventually. He laughs more. Smiles more. The castle is cold, his parents colder, despite all that the Prince Regent tries to make time for his son. He’s nice, Sapnap realizes, when George brings them sweets from a dinner he’d been forced into by his parents. Sapnap had liked George when he was soft-spoken and frowned more than he smiled, but Sapnap *loves* the friend George slowly grows into.

He’s thoughtful, and he tries to be mature and grown-up, tries to emulate his mom, but he’s just - too nice. He’s demanding and pushy and spoiled, but George is, more than anything, *kind*. He’s funny in a really annoying way but once, when Sapnap and Dream got into a snit and Sapnap had hidden himself in the library to hide his tears, George had tracked him down and sat with him for hours. They’d just sat in the quiet, Sapnap leaning on his shoulder and George reading quietly to him, until Dream had found them and joined them and quietly apologized. All three of them had been in *so* much trouble for skipping out on their duties that Bad had even grounded *George* and made him do *laundry* alongside Dream and Sapnap. George had still snuck into their room that night and they’d all slept sitting up against the wall, Sapnap in the middle and illicit sweets from George’s dinner nothing but crumbs in their laps.

In the end, George didn’t even have to do anything to make Sapnap love him. Like Dream, he just - clicked into place. One day not there, and then one day *there*, and Sapnap was happier for it. He, just as Bad had promised when Sapnap was a child, becomes someone Sapnap wants to protect. He becomes Sapnap’s best friend, just as important to him as Dream.

He didn’t believe in fate. But this was pretty damn close.

And as they grow up, Sapnap watches. Sometimes in the middle, sometimes on the sidelines, he

bears witness to the love story of Prince George and his loyal knight, Dream. Every fight, every first, every fluster - Sapnap is there, or he was forced to hear about it, his left ear bent to Dream's woes and his right bent to George's. He spends countless nights listening to Dream list the pros and cons of confessing his love, and he spends countless days listening to George valiantly attempt to pretend Dream hasn't wormed his way into his heart. He's the first person Dream found the day they'd first kissed, Dream swirling into their shared room like a tornado, hair a mess and clothes askew and eyes so bright Sapnap had feared a fever-induced delirium. He's the first person George finds, too, only an hour later while Sapnap is *trying* to do his homework in the library, looking perfectly put together except for the smile George can't force off his face no matter how he tries. George is the one that finally gets Dream to smile again when Puffy decides to go back to the sea when Dream is old enough to stay at the castle on his own and George is the one that carefully, shyly, asks Sapnap if it's really okay, for him to love Dream as something other than just a best friend.

Sapnap plays lookout for them throughout his teen years, lies about their whereabouts so they can go on dates and is forced to third-wheel just as many. They always make time for him, though, outside of what they have together, and Sapnap has time with each of them on his own, too. Sapnap has never been jealous; how could he be? His two favorite people in the entire world are in love. The sort of love people write fairy tales about. Dream never glows like he does when George is about, and George relaxes, becomes himself, in the light of Dream's smile.

He has plans for their honeymoon in his mind, by the time he's twenty; thoughts on what present he should get them for their wedding, opinions on the color scheme because he knows George won't care at all and Dream will care too much and turn to him when George throws his hands up. He already has pranks prepared for each of their individual stag parties, even with all the royal scandals that he'll probably set in motion. He's prepared to grow old with them, just like this, for the rest of his life, and he's *happy* at the thought because it means he gets to spend that life with his two best friends.

Sapnap never doubts his place in their lives. To him, Dream will always be his first friend, the boy who washed clothes with him by moonlight. To him, George will always be that stuffy prince practically hiding behind his mother's skirts, aching for companions but too lonely to reach for them first. To him, they will always be his best friends, the two people he'd give anything for.

For them, for their happiness, Sapnap would sacrifice anything.

“*Dream?*” Sapnap repeats, voice breaking, “What - *What?*”

XD - Dream? - slowly turns his head from George to Sapnap. That fucking *mask* is still there, hiding his face from Sapnap, but Sapnap knows. He knows what he heard.

“Sapnap...” That voice says his name.

“*What?*” He repeats again, because what else is there to be said, “*What the fuck. What the fuck.*”

“*What's going on?*” George winces, “*Why are you calling XD -*”

“*W-who are you?*” Sapnap slowly lifts Nightmare, not quite pointing it at XD but not *not* pointing it, either. “*What the fuck is going on? George?*”

“Sapnap, what -?” George puts a hand to his temple, flinching, “Please, calm down, my head -”

“No.” Sapnap shakes his head. He's trembling. “No, enough. Enough running away. Enough,

George. I can't - I *won't* wait anymore. Why does XD sound like Dream? Why - why does XD look like - is he - Are you - Dream?"

XD is silent.

"*Answer me!*" Sapnap shouts, "Answer me, Gods *damn it!*"

"*Sapnap, stop!*" George sways, eyes squinting tightly closed. In his arms, XD shifts, moves so he can be the one holding George instead, "Stop!"

"No! I want to know! I need to know! What happened? What happened to Dream, why does XD *sound* like him, why -"

"Who are you *talking* about!?" George shouts back, cutting him off, "*Sapnap, who is Dream!?* Why are you - ahh -" George stops himself, leaning over with his head in his hands, "Ow, ow, ow, *ow* -"

"What..." Sapnap staggers, losing feeling in his legs. His knees hit the ground heavily, Nightmare sliding from his grip. A parody of a knight, kneeling before his king. "That isn't funny. George, that isn't fucking funny. That isn't fair, that isn't - you can't - don't -"

"I'm not *joking*, you dick!" George groans, "Ow, fuck, my *head* - K-Karl, my medicine -"

"I'm on it," Karl stumbles to the enderchest, "On it, right now,"

"Not joking? Not *joking*?" Sapnap shakes his head, "What the *fuck*, George. Please. Please, just, just tell me. Just tell me what happened, we don't have to talk about it again, just *please* -"

"Tell you what?" George forces his face up from his hands, face strained with pain, tears gathering, "Tell you *what*, Sapnap? I'll tell you whatever you want, just tell me what you want to know and I'll tell you!"

"What happened?" Sapnap demands, "What happened in the throne room, what happened with Dream? Where is he? Where did he go, George?"

"Sap, it *hurts*," George shakes his head, going practically limp as he slumps into XD's side.

"Sapnap, stop." XD cuts in and it's like a knife in his heart, hearing that voice, "Stop asking him, he's hurting -"

"Shut up!" Sapnap snarls, "Shut up, I have to know. *I have to know!* He was the most important person in the world to us, how can you not know?!"

"I don't know." George rests his forehead on XD's, breathing heavily. He's sweating, no longer from heat but from pain, "I don't know what you're asking me, Sapnap. The throne room? I - I don't, no one else was *there*, Sap. It was just me and the throne, and it wanted *you* and I fought it and then I woke up and we were out. Who are you talking about?"

Sapnap feels cold. Every part of his body is shaking and ice covers him all the way down to his bones because this can't be happening, this isn't happening, there's no fucking way -

"Sapnap," A voice behind him, not George or whatever XD is. Karl. "Sapnap, you need to breathe. You're not breathing."

To take a breath would kill him. That's what it feels like, a crushing pressure on his chest that will

give the moment he lets his lungs expand.

“Sap,” Quackity this time, at his shoulder, “Sap, *breathe*.”

“How?” Sapnap says, a rush of air in the word, letting that agony loose, his fingers curling in the coarse dirt of the birch forest, “I don’t understand - *how*? ”

“It is,” XD says, in that damned voice, “*difficult to explain*.”

“Explain it,” Sapnap hisses out, “*Fucking explain it, I don’t care how difficult it is!*”

“Once,” XD says, then falters. His hair - Dream’s hair - rustles in the breeze, “Once, I was Dream. Now, I am...not. I am more.”

Sapnap feels like a nail is being driven into his heart, deep and endless, every word out of XD’s mouth another hammer against his chest, “What the *fuck* does that mean?”

George shudders, tremulous, “Karl -”

“Here, here, here,” Karl appears with the herbs, still shaky as he hurries over to George and helps him shove the herbs into his mouth. George chews rapidly, veins visible with how hard he’s clenching his jaw. Sapnap would feel bad, would feel worried, it’s only that he doesn’t feel much at all, right now. Nothing at all, except the ice.

“George.” XD turns back to him, hands going to either side of his head, fingers settling on his temples. “Stop trying to remember. It’s okay.”

“I’m try -” George breathes out hard, “I’m *trying to* -”

“It’s gone, George. Stop.” XD rubs soothing circles against George’s skin, “You won’t find what you’re looking for. Give up.”

“No -”

“**Stop.**” XD orders and George goes limp. He isn’t unconscious, Sapnap thinks, but he drops his head heavily into XD’s hands and XD carefully leads him down to rest his forehead on XD’s shoulder. Sapnap isn’t entirely sure that George can even hear them right now. At times, his migraines would get so bad that he wouldn’t remember the minutes before and after. He might be conscious, but he’s certainly not aware. For XD to induce that, to try and stop him *remembering*...

“What do you mean, *he won’t find it?*” Sapnap feels dizzy, too. There’s someone at his back, a hand settled on his chest.

“Breathe.” Quackity says into his ear, “Sapnap, you have to breathe.”

Sapnap breathes, follows Quackity’s lead, until his vision isn’t quite as dark as before.

“George doesn’t remember Dream.” XD says simply.

“*Why?*”

“I was...Dream was taken. From him. From you. By the throne.”

“*How?*”

“That is...a long story.” XD looks down at George, whose shoulders are rising and falling in great

heaving gasps of pain as he waits for the medicine to take effect.

“Tell me the fucking story, then, XD.” Sapnap grits out. His hand finds Quackity’s and squeezes. He’s using him as an anchor, and Quackity doesn’t hesitate to lace their fingers together.

“I am not Dream.” XD says carefully, “You must understand that, Sapnap. I have his memories. I have his face, perhaps. But I am not him. I do not feel like him. I do not - love, like him. I am simply a vessel through which Dream and the throne choose to achieve their goals.”

“Goals?” Quackity asks, because Sapnap can’t. He’s being crushed under an invisible weight, right now.

“To return to George’s side. To keep him safe. To -”

“Make him happy.” Sapnap finishes for him.

“Yes.” XD nods. “When Dream killed the Warden -”

“The *what* -?”

“ - he did so with one wish in mind. To return to George, however that may be. I am what is left of that wish. He did something that no mortal being, no royal or their beloved has ever done. And I am what was created, his reward for his victory.”

“Wait,” Karl says, “Wait, we’re missing something here. Sapnap, you said the throne would take something from George, his humanity or his love or something that would change him irrevocably. XD is saying it took a *person*? ”

“Back in the swamp,” Sapnap says, mouth dry, “He said - the throne. The throne would take *me*.”

XD nods, “As it would have, if you had been there.”

“Don’t,” Sapnap says, tight, “Don’t say that, *don’t*-”

“Sapnap, you know this,” George says, weakly, surprising considering how he still shudders under the pain in his head, “Sap, I told you. I know I did.”

He inhales sharply a second later, his head dropping back onto XD’s shoulder, a low moan of pain escaping him.

“You told Dream, George,” XD says, gentle, even though George surely cannot hear him over the pain at this point, “The memories are gone, but the intentions remain. Your mind said you told Sapnap, because it remembered that you told *someone*. ”

“But if Dream knew, why -” Sapnap can’t *think*, “Why did he - he would have known where George was headed, why did he -”

“To protect you.” XD sighs, “We were - you and Dream, either would have done, for what the throne needed. It’s why I - why he sent you away and went to the throne room during the coup. It is the way to come into power; each ascendent must prove themselves worthy of the right to rule by accepting the power of the throne and retrieving their sacrifice from within the Nether. But George... George refused. In the history of our - the throne’s existence - never before has an ascending monarch refused the throne.” Fondness trickles into XD’s voice, the same fondness that Sapnap knew so well and it aches more than anything, “Never before has a royal and their beloved tried to *destroy* it.”

Sapnap chokes back a sob. Of course they tried to destroy it without him, of course they ran headlong into danger and did not stop to think of the consequences or *wait* for him.

“It was never meant to be done,” XD says. “The memories were...a victim of the recoil. A retaliation against such a treachery that we had never known, taking away what was so important that he would try to *destroy* me - us - the throne. His memories of Dream were taken, so that he may never understand why he did what he did and be tempted to do it again.”

“Can you -” Sapnap starts, stops, falters. He will not ask anything of the throne, no matter how much he looks like his best friend. “Bring him back. Give him back. You don’t - you don’t get to keep him anymore. We’ve done *enough*. ”

“It is not your duty to fight for him. It must be George -”

“I don’t *care*,” Sapnap snarls, “I don’t give a flying *fuck*, of course it’s my duty! Of course it’s my duty to fight for him, he’s my best friend! I want my best friend back, you asshole, give him back -”

“There is nothing there to return. He is gone. What is left of him is here. Within me - us. I...He waited, but no one came to save him. So he tried to save himself. And I was born from that desperation. His desire to return to George’s side.”

“Shut up,” Sapnap says. The ground is steady under him, there are birds in the trees and all of it is wrong, twisted, none of it should be here at all, not if Dream is gone, not if he is beyond help, beyond saving, beyond Sapnap’s reach. The world should be falling apart, because Sapnap is.

“Stop, just *stop*, don’t fucking say another word, fucking *stop* -”

“I am sorry,” XD says, quietly. It could be regret in his voice, in the voice that he stole, but Sapnap doesn’t want to listen, can’t listen. It’s a walking, talking corpse of his best friend, and he feels sick, feels like his world has tumbled from its axis and come to rest in a grave of his own making.

“Your friend still...exists, if he does not live. Within -”

“STOP!” He shouts, “Stop, I can’t, you - you’re a fucking monster. You’re *not* Dream! You’re *not*. Dream would have *told* me, he would have - he would have fucking cared when he saw h-how hard I was struggling, how much I missed him, he would have *told me* - but you, you just - you knew all this time, what happened to him, and you just *floated* around, frolicking with George, pretending like you aren’t standing where *someone else belongs* -”

Sapnap gets too choked up to continue, his throat closing. His rant ends in a long, wounded whine, a fox caught in a trap. He bends over, forehead nearly touching the ground and hugs himself, as if the pressure of his own hands on his arms will make the pain lessen.

XD does not reply for a long time. His hand comes up, cards through George’s hair where the other is slumped, his breathing now slowed, steadier, though pain is still etched into his skin. The silence is too much.

“I’m sorry.” XD eventually says, voice empty, and something in Sapnap finally shatters.

“Don’t fucking follow me,” He says to the group as a whole, getting to his feet and holding Nightmare tight to his side, pulling out of Quackity’s arms, “Don’t you even fucking think about it. Just - just leave me alone.”

“Sapnap!” George calls for him weakly, but he barely registers his voice. He isn’t thinking himself when he storms into the trees, amongst the familiar birch where once he hunted with the rest of the

barracks; where they once played capture the flag and he and Dream won, all on their own; where they would set up manhunts, Dream sprinting away from them, whooping and shouting in delight -

He falls at some point in his grief-fueled flight, tumbles over a tree root because his eyes are blurring too much with tears for him to even see. His hands skid in the dirt and fallen leaves, splinters in his palms and Nightmare skitters out of reach, landing in a patch of mud.

He stays there, panting heavily, staring at the sword, that fucking sword. In his whirlwind mind, all he can think is: *He'd be so mad I got it dirty.*

It's this that breaks him. Because Dream isn't going to be mad. He's not going to be anything, ever again; he's not going to come up with some crazy trick to slip away from them again. He's never going to hug Sapnap and ruffle his hair and thank him for keeping his sword sharp and for all the rations Sapnap left out for him. He's never going to stand, cowed as Sapnap shouts all his frustrations at him. He will never answer Sapnap's questions of *why did you leave, why didn't you tell me, why wouldn't you let me help?* Sapnap will never be able to introduce him to Karl and Quackity, will never be able to tackle him to the ground again, will never *see* him again.

Dream is gone. Dream is *gone*.

Sapnap screams. It echoes in the trees, against the sky and the sun and the very earth, a wordless shout of pure agony and unfaltering grief. The wind rushes in his ears, perhaps a melody from the universe, from the bard's star, whispers of *I'm sorry I'm sorry I'd save him if only I had the voice left to -*

Sapnap screams because he cannot do anything else. He could not save his best friend and the corpse of his failure has been traveling with him for months and he didn't even *notice* -

Dream had *waited* for them. He'd waited, and Sapnap had been gallivanting about the countryside, had just been sitting on his ass and crying about missing Dream instead of - of saving him, of *helping* him - why hadn't he pushed George, why hadn't he stayed, why hadn't he given George to his dad and told them to run and turned around to find Dream - why - why - *why* -

“Sap, oh, Sap, baby,” A body drops into his field of view, blocking the sword from his vision, “Sapnap, Sapnap, we're *so* sorry.”

Arms come up, hands reach out but he flinches back.

“Don't,” He says, voice thick and choking, and his vision blurs again, steam rising, “Don't, I'll hurt you, *don't* - I t-told you not to come after me, I'm dangerous right now -”

Karl hesitates - because it is Karl, there and real and alive in front of him - but his hand stays out anyway.

“I don't care,” He says, quietly, “Sapnap, we don't care.”

“He's gone,” Sapnap says, stumbling over the words and they rip at his throat, a traitor's admission, “He's gone, he's gone, he's gone -”

“I know,” Karl says, “I know, Sapnap, I know.”

“We're here,” Quackity says, softly, from behind them, “We're here, Sapnap. We're not going to leave.”

“I failed him.” Sapnap puts his head in his hands, his palms searing against his eyes, “I failed him. I

failed them both. He waited. He was *waiting for us* -"

"You didn't know." Karl lays a hand on his back, his sweat-slicked shirt the only buffer between his hand and Sapnap's heat, "You didn't know, baby. You couldn't have known."

"It hurts so much." he admits, voice breaking, "I can't - how am I supposed to survive this?"

"Don't worry about that." Quackity's hand finds his, carefully lifting Sapnap's face up and cupping his cheeks, unbothered as always by his lack of control. Sapnap tries to see through the tears and steam, but everything is blurry and his head is dizzy and he's suffocating under it all. Quackity's thumbs brush at the corners of his eyes and Sapnap blinks, his throat tight and scratchy. "We'll think about surviving later. Right now, you're allowed to cry. Okay?"

"You're allowed to feel whatever you want." Karl echoes and he's suddenly there, in Sapnap's vision, too, and his face is wet with tears.

"You're crying." Sapnap points out uselessly.

"You're hurting." Karl says, like that is explanation enough, and then he's choking back tears and throwing himself into Sapnap's arms, "I can feel how much you're hurting, Sap."

"Oh." Sapnap sniffls, and then he's - sobbing, all at once. He loses his grip on the last of his control, feels the tidal wave of grief overcome him, and all he can do is *cry*, barely breathing through the choking sobs, just gasping when he can in a subconscious attempt to not pass out. His eyes are burning, he can feel them, the sting of salt and steam, and none of it even matters. Karl clutches him so tight it hurts and Quackity joins them, the both of them bracketing Sapnap in a tight, secure hug. It keeps him up and off the dirt, where he wants to simply curl up and sink deep - into the dirt and clay, to where Dream was once found, in the hopes of somehow finding him again.

"It's okay." Karl whispers, "It's okay, we've got you."

"We're here." Quackity says into his hair, his hand on the back of Sapnap's neck and his hair quickly drying off the sweat and frizzing wildly with the steam from Sapnap's tears.

Sapnap lets himself cry. There's nothing else he can do. He's too late to save Dream. Too late to save George. He can't even save Dream's *memories*. George will never have those back. He'll never remember the way Dream loved him, how he lit up when George walked into a room. He won't remember the first time Dream convinced him to pick up a sword, or the first time he successfully hit a bullseye and Dream lifted him up in front of everyone in celebration while Sapnap laughed so hard he fell over and George shrieked. George won't remember the nights the three of them fell asleep under one blanket while Bad told Badlands myths, or all of the chores they helped each other do during punishments. He won't remember the birthdays or Dream's eyes or his smile - *his* smile, not XD's, not that *thing*'s facade.

Would Sapnap even want him to? Here he is, nothing but snapped stitches and a shredded heart, barely held together by two people, and he has all of those memories. Would he curse this on George, who doesn't realize what he's lost? If he could, would he give George this agony right now? Would it be worth it for George?

"This is all my fault," Sapnap mumbles into Karl's shoulder, "All of this, it's my fault."

"No," Quackity starts immediately, "No, never, no, *no*—"

"I didn't tell you," Sapnap says, heavy as stone, the truth weighing on him, "I didn't tell you, before. At the coup, I..."

"We heard him too, Sapnap," Karl says, "They just wanted to protect you. It *wasn't* your fault."

"No." Sapnap shakes his head, tears not slowing, "No, you don't understand. I could have been there in time. I could have saved him."

"Sapnap, you can't blame yourself." Quackity rubs his shoulder firmly, "You can't do that."

"If I'd - there was..." Sapnap has to say it, has to admit what he'd done, if only to them. If George wouldn't understand, then he has to at least say it to them, "I t-told you, Dream sent me to the east wing. I...I didn't find him: George. So I was coming back. I just, I had a feeling that I'd find them there, in the throne room. So I was headed there."

Karl and Quackity quiet down, let him speak. It, somehow, makes it so much harder to admit, under their understanding eyes.

"I cut through a servant's hall." he swallows, "It was a shortcut, I didn't think I'd *see* anyone, but - but someone was running. There was an - an assistant, I think, I don't know. It was dark, and I was out of my mind and there was so much *blood*, I could barely even see their face, but I don't think I'd ever met them before. They were being chased. There were knights. I dunno if they were Eret's or the Queen's, but the assistant, they asked me to help them. They asked me to save them, and I couldn't say no. I couldn't say no, so we hid and I was there for *so long*, waiting for those knights to pass. I should have just gone through. I could have fought, I could have got around, I dunno. I dunno, but I stayed w-with them. I stayed, and then I gave them my sword and led them to a staircase."

Karl rubs his arms, trying to comfort, but Quackity has gone still, white-pale as a sheet. Sapnap can't look them in the eyes, can't face the condemnation. "By the time I got to the throne room, George... George was unconscious. He was bleeding, and I thought, I thought I was too late, that the throne had got him. I - I knew I was too late when I saw the sword. Nightmare." He nods towards the sword behind Karl, obscured by his form, "It's all - It's all I've got left of Dream. And I don't fucking deserve it. I fucking failed, I failed at being a best friend, I failed at being George's knight! The one thing I didn't fucking fail at was *losing*. I did what a knight was supposed to do, and it *killed* him. I wish -" His breath hitches and splinters in his chest, the admission cracking his voice and his chest in two, "I wish I hadn't -"

"Shh," Quackity cuts him off, voice strained, "Don't, okay? Please, don't talk about it anymore."

"Q," Sapnap starts to properly weep, having cooled down enough with them touching him that the tears don't steam away, "Q, it's all my fault."

"It wasn't." Quackity insists, hugging him tight again, "Shh, it wasn't. It isn't. It was never your fault, Sapnap. Not ever."

"You did a good thing." Karl strokes his hair, the both of them so very gentle, "You were *good*, Sapnap. You helped someone that needed it."

"I could have -"

"No," Quackity says, and his voice shakes as he said it, "No. You're... you're good, Sapnap. You're a good person. A *kind* person."

"We've all got things we regret," Karl says softly, pressing a light kiss to the top of his head, "All three of us. You told us, and that's so brave, Sapnap. Braver than us. It wasn't your fault."

"It killed him."

“I know, Sapnap.”

“Then,” His voice breaks, shatters, “Then how can I be good? I let him die.”

“Never,” Quackity says and this time his voice is firm and strong, “That wasn’t you, you hear me? You’re the best of us. It wasn’t your fault. You just tried to help.”

“It cost so much,” Sapnap clings, holds tight to Quackity’s shirt, knows he’s cutting a pathetic figure right now, crying on the ground about someone he lost essentially half a year ago. Karl keeps his arms tight around them both, running his fingers through Sapnap’s hair as he gently hushes him, soothing and soft. He presses his head into Quackity’s chest, listens to the rapid thumping of his heart. He’s still so cold. He can still feel his breath shuddering in his chest, the remnants of sobs still rattling in his bones. But he knows that they’ll hold him through it, though, and that’s enough for him right now. It’s all he has to keep him together right now.

“It did.” Quackity agrees, quiet, “It did.”

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

hello hello its hannah posting again :)

ive personally been really excited about this chapter for awhile. george was my biggest worry when we were plotting this fic and this was our attempt to give u some perspective on him! we love him ur honor, and the massive lore dump his pov allows. now on to more important things:

WE HAVE!!! MORE ART!!!!!! FOR YOU!!!!!! FROM SOME TRULY AMAZING ARTISTS ON TWITTER DOT COM.

THIS LOVELY KARL/Q PIECE! is by @draw_Rudy on twitter so please go look!!!!

AND THIS ADORABLE PIECE is dreamnap as KIDS FROM CHAPTER 7!!! GOSH THEYRE ADORABLE. Please go check out @amusingghost on twitter, too!!!!

Ok now for the show. This one is a lil longer (perhaps to make up for the 3k shorting that happened last chapter lmao). As always, Mari (bramble) and I hope u enjoy <3 <3 <3

cw: violence, implied major character death, severe memory loss

This is what George remembers: a flash of light, a hand slipping out of his, and a staggering, shattering pain. It rattled through his skull, tearing through his mind like a predator into prey, pulling and ripping it apart.

He has a brief moment of *no, not him, please, don't take him* - before he is pulled under and swept away in a tide of agony.

The next time he wakes, there's just shouting.

“I have to go back -”

“The palace is overrun, you’ll be killed!”

“I don’t care, he’s somewhere out there, I have to -”

“Your duty is to George! Sapnap - Pandas, you know what they’ll do to him if they find him!”

“Bad, I can’t just -”

“I’ll look, alright? You take George, and you run, and I’ll do everything I can. I promise.”

“Dad,” Sapnap, that’s Sapnap, it’ll take him, it’ll hurt him, it sounds like it already has, voice wrung out with loss. George wants to step in, wants to ask what’s wrong but the pain rears up again, an angry beast of burden, dragging him back down, “Dad, what if he’s just gone?”

Who?

And by the time he woke up again, properly, embraced Sapnap and held him close while Sapnap cried in his arms for the first time in their entire friendship, he had forgotten the exchange entirely.

George knows why they're running. The night of the coup is a blur of pain and fear and the knowledge that if he doesn't escape, then the throne will take someone he holds very dear. Sapnap is in danger and that danger goes down with every mile he drags him across the country. George doesn't care where they go, what country, who they fight, who comes after him - he doesn't care, as long as he can keep Sapnap safe.

Two months is both a lifetime and not; they've been on the run all this time and George has forgotten the feeling of sleeping in his bed, eating as much of whatever kind of food as he wants. He misses his parents, even his mom. The last thing he'd heard from them was his dad yelling *George, find Sapnap and run!* and his mom screaming before he'd bolted. He knows they're dead. He knows Eret's knights killed them. He tries not to hate them, knows that that's just the way of government. If it hadn't been his parents, it would have been him. If it were not him, it would one day be his descendants. The monarchy had been teetering on the edge of collapse, and it would have always fallen. Hell, sometimes he had even wished that it would. But not like this. Never like this.

When he blinks, he still sees the fires. The coup had been a violent one, and a knight had lit the royal chambers, his and both of his parent's, ablaze. The smoke had been blinding, suffocating. He'd run wildly, just *away*. He'd ended up in the throne room in his search for Sapnap and the throne had said **It is time** and George had said *no* and he'd meant it, and then Sapnap had been there and now...now they were running.

Sapnap hasn't slept in a week. The grief is still in every line of his face, from the way his eyes are dull when he thinks George isn't looking to the heaviness in which he raises Nightmare to fight. His voice is different, too; he speaks with a weight more like how George's father spoke, like the entire world was on his shoulders. It's loss, George knows, but doesn't know who. He and Sapnap have been together since George was thirteen; he's known every crush Sapnap has ever had, every heartbreak, every friend, every enemy. But he doesn't know who Sapnap lost during the coup, and he can't bring himself to bring it up, to ask. There's something in his mind that says *don't open that wound, it will only hurt*, so he doesn't.

Besides, talk of the past triggers migraines, now. George thinks he hit his head when he was in the throne room, remembers being hurled back and landing in a gangly pile of pain and limbs, and since that night, the migraines come on - sometimes weak, sometimes so strong he thinks he is going to die. So he doesn't talk about the coup, and Sapnap doesn't talk about the coup, and he leaves Sapnap to ration for a ghost every night without complaint. Maybe one day, when they're safe and have a little farm in Snowchester or wherever they end up, then George will chow down as much migraine medicine as his body can handle and they can hash out exactly what happened that night.

"Sap," He says, rolling to a halt as the pale yellows and greens of sunset start to paint the sky, "We're stopping to camp."

"If you're tired, I'll just carry you." Sapnap stops, too, and turns to look at him with a frown. He's got the enderchest strapped to his back and he hasn't let George carry it in a while. He looks exhausted, dark bags under bloodshot eyes.

"No." George crosses his arms, "I want a camp. We're camping here."

“It’s not safe.”

“I’m sick of sleeping in snatches of time, Sapnap. I’m dropping down right here and taking a nap so you can either help me set up camp or keep going and I’ll catch up.” And George does drop right there, crosses his legs and arms and stares balefully at his tired knight until Sapnap rubs his face roughly and gives in.

“At least set up the tent, you spoiled fuck.” Sapnap sets the enderchest down and opens it, pulling out the torches to set their perimeter. George doesn’t crow in victory only because it would give his game away.

They get a camp set up in record time, far enough off the main path that Sapnap’s shoulders come down from around his ears. George gets a rough fire going - he’s getting better! - and sets out three meals, an apple and chunk of dried jerky for each of them plus their invisible companion.

“Rest.” Sapnap says shortly, bundled up under his cloak and staring at the fire.

“*You* rest.” George wrinkles his nose up at him and drops down next to him. He leans heavily on Sapnap’s shoulder and is relieved when Sapnap accepts the touch. Slowly, slowly, over the next half hour as they both eat, Sapnap lists ever so slightly against George. George doesn’t move. He lets Sapnap lean until, with a deep inhale, he feels Sapnap go limp in sleep.

Finally, George lets himself smile and look away from the fire, stretching his legs out carefully. Sapnap won’t wake up unless someone comes into camp. He’s far too accustomed to George’s natural sounds for them to disturb his sleep anymore. George carefully shimmies out from under Sapnap, lays him down on the ground by the fire and tucks one of their pillows under his head, uses his own cloak as a blanket and readjusts Nightmare so it isn’t digging into Sapnap uncomfortably.

George will keep watch tonight. He isn’t as good about sleep deprivation as Sapnap is, but he’ll make it work.

The next few hours pass uneventfully. George keeps an ear out for danger as he makes more arrows, having lost a few in their last flight from a group of mercenaries. *Those* had started showing up a couple weeks ago. George wishes they’d waited at least until he and Sapnap were closer to the coast, and Snowchester, before they started sending bounty hunters, but what can he do? Except make arrows, of course.

He finishes fairly quickly, a new bundle done to add to his collection. Sapnap is still sleeping silently, the only proof that he’s even alive is the slow shift of his shoulders as he sleeps. He has nightmares, George knows. He thinks it’s of the coup, but George won’t ask. He doesn’t want to open what they have no time or resources to close, while they run. He hopes Sapnap is dreamless tonight, at least. Hopes he rests.

George doesn’t know how Sapnap does it, just staying in camp all night, not reading or napping or doing *something* to pass the time while George sleeps. George is bored already, and he knows he has hours left before the sun is up and they can move. Past the bright torches, he hears mobs; the crackle of skeleton bones and the distant explosion of a creeper agitated by *something*.

He peers toward the noise, curious about what goes on in the dark forest outside of his vision - and sees something.

He blinks and the something is gone.

He draws his bow and stands, an arrow notched immediately and aimed toward where he saw the whisper of cloak. A deep...green, George would guess, or yellow - it's too dark for his eyes to pinpoint the shade. Either way, it doesn't blend seamlessly with the pale forest colors around them.

"Come out." he says, quietly, "I know you're there."

He sees a bush rustle, and then another a few feet away, and then another, going deeper into the forest. There's a more lingering flash of - a cloak, yes, George is sure that's a cloak.

"George..." a voice, echoing in his mind with an unfamiliar tone, "George, I found you."

"Found me?" George looks around wildly, bringing his bow with him, "What?"

"I'm here, George..." the voice says again and there's a rustle of tree and bush deeper in the forest, outside of the torchlight. "Come here, George. Nothing will hurt you."

"You're insane if you think I'm taking a step out of these lights." George says shortly, "Who are you?"

"Don't you recognize me, George?" the voice says, sounding hurt, "I fought so hard to come back to you."

George winces, an unexpected pain blooming in his temple, "Back to me? Who are you? Where did you go, if you're coming back?"

"Have you forgotten me, George?" From the darkness of the forest, a cloaked figure emerges. It is tall, towering over George by a good foot or more, and its cloak sways and floats in a breeze that isn't there. The most striking, and terrifying, thing about it, though, is the mask. Pure white, like the moon, with thick black lines marking out a sideways X and an upside-down D. It makes it look like he's laughing, in a childish sort of font.

"Who..." George shudders, "Who are you?"

"I am..." the figure trails off, "So many things."

Sapnap, from his place by the fire, shifts and makes a soft noise of awareness. Something that isn't George must prickle at him and George hurriedly drops his bow from the ready position and kneels to run a soothing, careful hand through Sapnap's hair.

"I'm safe." he whispers, soft and low, "Everything's okay. You can rest, Pandas."

Sapnap hums, appeased, and slips back into a dead sleep, turning his head into George's touch with a sigh. George watches him, heart aching. One should look peaceful, when asleep. It should be a time that offers escape. Sapnap simply looks as if sorrow is all he has left to know.

When George looks up at the figure, it has stepped away from the torchlight but still stands, illuminated just enough for the fire to reflect off the porcelain of its mask.

"He should rest more." it observes.

"Fuck off." George says shortly and carefully stands again, readying his bow again. He aims his arrow at the center of the mask. "Have you been following us?"

"Yes." It says simply, "For days, now."

"Why?"

“I told you.” the figure steps forward again, slow, careful, “I fought my way back to your side. Like I promised I would. Why didn’t you come for me, George? Was I not important enough? Did you run out of time?”

“What?” George can’t help but drop his bow again, blinking rapidly at the dark spots appearing in his vision, as if he’s stared at the sun too long, “I don’t know what - who - what are you - ah -”

He staggers, a palm going to his head as he sucks in a hard breath. His entire head pulses with agony and he can’t hold back the soft whimper of pain.

“Oh.” The figure says, soft. “I understand. You don’t remember me. I took that away.”

“What?” George takes a single step forward and feels his legs turn to jelly. It’s all he can do to stay standing, “What did you take?”

“Nevermind.” The figure holds out a hand, fingers gloved in a rich color matching the cloak. George decides it’s green - yellow wouldn’t match the forest, he must be in a dark green, “If you come to me, I can make the pain stop.”

“I need medicine, you madman.” George snarks, “I’m not going near you. You’re *crazy*.”

“I’m not crazy.” the voice drops, “George, won’t you trust me? I promise, I’d never hurt you. I only want to make you happy.”

“That’s creepy, too.” George shakes his head and goes to the enderchest to find his medicine. The roots are bitter and dry, but he chews two until his tongue has practically shriveled in his mouth. It won’t take effect for a few minutes so he takes a sip of water and tries to breathe.

“Creepy?” the voice frowns, George can *hear* it even if he can’t see it behind the mask, “How? I just want to help.”

“You’re a stranger in a mask in the woods, talking to me from the edges of my camp, asking me to come closer so you can *take my pain away*, dude.” George doesn’t open his eyes, scared that visual stimulus will only hurt more. He thinks he probably should be more than slightly creeped out by the figure but - he isn’t. He’s blind, for the moment, and his knight is sleeping in an exhausted haze, and there’s a stranger who radiates power that even *George* can feel. But he isn’t scared. Something in him tells him he is in no real danger.

“That’s not a very nice way of describing me, though it is accurate, for the most part.”

“Yeah? Which part is wrong?”

“I’m not a stranger.”

“I don’t know your name.” George frowns, “So you’re a stranger.”

“You know me,” the figure argues, “Even if your mind doesn’t. Your heart does. Don’t remember me, George, just...recognize me.”

“How do I recognize you if I don’t remember you?” George scoffs, “You’re not making any sense, random person in the woods.”

“George.” the figure drops his voice again, soft, practically crooning at him, “You know me.”

And, somehow, George feels like he does.

“Fine.” George finally feels his migraine start to recede and is able to open his eyes, “Say I do. Recognize you, I mean. I don’t know your name so it doesn’t make a difference.”

“Call me whatever you like.” The figure is there, watching him through the mask. He’s not floating anymore, cloak pooled on the ground around his feet.

“Whatever I like?” George frowns, looks the figure over, “Do you not have a name?”

“I do.” the figure shrugs, “And I do not. My name doesn’t fit what I am anymore, but I don’t want to be a stranger. So name me.”

“Fine.” George plays along, “XD. For your mask. Which is stupid, by the way.”

“It’s not stupid.” The figure touches gloved fingertips to its mask, “You think it’s stupid?”

“So stupid.” George nods, “But whatever. You dress however you want, XD.”

“XD.” the figure drops its - his? - hand. “Okay. I’m not a stranger in the woods anymore, now, George. I have a name for you.”

“Having a name doesn’t make the rest of it less creepy, XD.” George can’t help but smile, “You’re still acting, like, *so* suspicious, right now. Very predator in the woods.”

“I’m not a predator in the woods.” XD huffs, “At least, not to *you!* I told you, I want to make you happy!”

“Why?” George wrinkles up his nose, “What am I to you? How do you know my name?”

“I’d know you even without a name.” XD says, suddenly serious. “If we were nothing but stardust, I’d know which specks were you. I’d know you if I were deaf and blind. If you were in a crowd of millions, I would find you unerringly.”

George blinks. “That’s nice. So how do you know my name?”

“You are why I am.” XD kneels, suddenly, as if a knight, “My prince.”

“Get up,” George said immediately, “Get up, right now. Don’t kneel for me. I’m not a prince, not anymore. I’ve left that. Is that what this is about? You’re after me because I was the prince?”

“Prince,” XD shakes his head, “Pauper, farmer, herder, tailor, cobbler, hunter, adventurer, fisherman, I don’t care. I’d be your knight regardless.”

“Stop saying that.” George snaps, “I have a knight and one is plenty. I don’t want - nor do I need - another one, your application is rejected. Leave me alone.”

“George -”

“Stop saying my name! How do you know me, stop speaking in riddles and answer me!”

XD goes quiet for a long time and then shifts so he is sitting down properly. His cloak moves as if he is crossing his legs and George glares at him, hands tight around his bow, still, though it is not drawn.

“I will tell you how I know your name.” XD decides. “Though you may not like it.”

“I’ll let you know what I like and dislike once you’ve told me.”

XD nods, just once, and then goes quiet again. He's still outside of the safety of the camp. George slowly comes closer, until there is only a jump's space between them, and sits to mirror XD.

"I am..." XD hesitates, but George thinks he's looking for words this time, not just stalling, "I don't know what I am. Something that has never existed before. I am a human who has become akin to a god."

"A bit haughty." George says without thinking, and is somehow rewarded with a genuine, short laugh from the figure - god? demigod? - in front of him.

"Sorry." XD shrugs, "But it is true. A human killed a god, and I was born when the magic changed hands."

"What god? Why'd you kill it?"

"A neutral god." XD shifts uncomfortably, "Though one that the human was at odds with. Their goals did not align, conflict was inevitable. The human's might was stronger."

"Interesting." George leans forward, "What were the goals?"

"The god," XD does pause to stall this time and George nearly reaches out to nudge him, only just holds himself back, "The god wanted you to take the throne. And the human wanted you to be happy."

George goes still. Even his breathing stops.

"The throne?"

XD nods. "The magic of the throne, once made homeless with the death of its vessel, joined with the human and found their goals compatible. And I was born."

"Which goals were those?" George manages to get out, actual fear finally beginning to lick up his spine.

"To find you." XD says immediately, "To keep you safe. To make you happy."

"The throne never wanted my happiness." George spits, "It never wanted me to be safe."

"I know." XD agreed easily. "Those were the goals of the human."

"And who would do that for me?" George points at Sapnap, "This is the only person I can think of who'd do that, sacrifice that, for me. And he's obviously right here, so who the hell would fight a god just so I'd be happy? Riddle me that, XD."

"That isn't important." XD straightens his back up, shoulders widening out, "Just know that he did. And I was born, and now I am here to protect you."

"Protect me from *what*? If you *are* the throne -"

"No." XD cuts in, "I am not the throne. I simply have a connection to the magic. The throne's desires, its goals, those I know. But I also know *his*, and they are both inside of me."

"So," George touches his bow. It's too long to shoot comfortably while sitting but he thinks he could probably get a good hit in if he needed to, "You're going to try to take me back. Us back. So the throne can use Sapnap to force me to become king."

“George,” XD intones, “You must return to complete what has begun. You cannot abandon your duty forever.”

And then XD shakes his head, looking down like he’s shaking a thought away and says, “But if returning will not make you happy, I will not force you.”

“Like you could.” George huffs, letting go of his bow, “I’m not scared of you.”

“You don’t have to be.” XD says simply, “I’d never hurt you.”

“Spoken like a conman.” George points, “You stay out here. I’m going back to the fire. Don’t come in, you’ll wake Sapnap up and he’ll kill you.”

“He could never beat me.” XD says and he sounds smug.

“Yes, he could!” George says, because he is loyal before he is honest, “He definitely could. So don’t test him. That sword would cut through you like grass. Easy.”

“Okay, George.” XD nods, and George gets that huffy laugh again, almost a wheeze, “If you say so.”

“I do.” George sticks his nose in the air as he climbs up and stomps to the fire. He drops next to Sapnap, refuses to look back at XD. He wants nothing to do with the throne, not even if it’s somehow fused with some man who had formed a parasocial relationship with the prince of the kingdom and killed a god.

XD doesn’t make another sound the rest of the night. As the sun begins to rise and Sapnap begins to stir, George glances over to check on him, as he had throughout the night, but the forest green cloak and pale moonlight mask are gone.

To be fair to George, he’d *told* Sapnap he was bored.

“I just need a few hours.” Sapnap had promised, even though it was the middle of the day. And that part is fair and fine, George won’t begrudge Sapnap sleep. It’s been days again since Sapnap had last slept. He’s still recovering from a wound he got in their last run-in with mercs, though, and he’s more tired than usual. Honestly, George is *happy* that Sapnap decided they need a break.

It’s just, with Sapnap sleeping, George is *bored*. He can’t be blamed for wandering off. He didn’t go *far*, he stayed within yelling distance so he would know if something happened upon Sapnap while he slept but - well. The tent camouflages well in this biome, and Sapnap is a very quiet sleeper. No one will come across him, and George just wanted to scout a little. See if he could find anything interesting. He’s not like Sapnap, who could spend hours outside just - tracking animals for fun or something. Whatever it is Sapnap does when he’s hunting. George is used to books at all times, painting on a whim, sneaking Sapnap away from training so they can dance -

Or, no. Sapnap doesn’t dance. George shakes his head.

Anyway.

He just wants something to entertain him for a few hours and he’s made as many arrows as his quiver can carry, so he wanders off a little.

The second he’s out of sight, XD is there.

“George.” he says, and it sounds like he’s smiling. “Hi, George.”

George ignores him. George has been ignoring him for days now, ever since they met. He doesn’t mind XD following them, so long as Sapnap doesn’t see and get even more stressed out than he already is, but he has *decided* that encouraging whatever weird relationship XD is trying to form with him would not be helpful or make his life any easier.

XD doesn’t seem to mind the quiet. He follows George very closely, only a step behind him, but he doesn’t touch and he doesn’t talk, so George lets him be.

There is nothing in the woods to entertain him. He finds a frog, for a bit, but it’s nothing spectacular and after watching it ribbit a few times, he loses interest.

And XD is *right* there.

It wouldn’t hurt, probably? To just spend a few hours having a conversation? Maybe even a conversation that isn’t a road trip game played with his best friend so they don’t kill each other.

“What was it like?” He finally stops. Despite the sudden cessation of movement, XD does not bump against him.

“What?”

“To go from human to demigod? You’re a demigod, by the way, in my head. I decided earlier.”

“I’ll accept demigod.” XD nods. “It was strange. I have never been anything but myself. What is left of the human is here, inside of me, and I know him. I hear his thoughts, I feel his emotions. He is here, buried deep, but he does not control me. It is like...he wants things. Both he and the throne. But I follow my own will.”

“So it’s like having an angel and a demon on your shoulder.”

“Neither is inherently good or bad, George. It is only a fresh human and very old magic. I am both the human and the magic, but neither.”

“So you have your own desires?” George turns to look at him, “What do you do, XD? If you’re not controlled by the throne.”

“Or the human.” XD reminds him.

“Or the human.” George acknowledges.

“I don’t know.” XD turns his mask to their surroundings, looking around as he speaks. “I am very new.”

“I don’t like the way you put that.” George wrinkles his nose up. New, huh? That could be fun. “So you don’t have desires? Hobbies? Things you like?”

“I like you.”

“I’m not a thing, XD.”

“I like...” XD trails off, “Nature. It’s peaceful.”

“See, there’s something! Okay, you like peaceful things. That’s a foundation.”

George spends the next two hours grilling XD about different things he might like. They settle on a few simple things; XD liked the frog. He would have watched it for much longer, had George not left. He likes watching Sapnap train as they travel. It makes the human feel good which, in turn, makes XD feel good.

“He was a fighter then, your human?”

“A swordsman.” XD nods, “And a very good one.”

“Interesting.” George taps his chin, “But Sapnap would still beat you.”

“Okay, George.”

“I hate when you do that. You don’t *mean* it, you just say it so I’ll stop arguing with you.”

XD hesitates for barely a second and then nods, “I do.”

“Ha! You admitted it!”

“I did.”

“Stop that! Argue back!”

“I don’t want to argue back.” XD says in a perfect imitation of George’s voice, and George falls back with laughter, giggling into his palms.

“I don’t sound like that!”

“You do.” XD shrugs, “I’m a demigod, George, imitation is not difficult.”

“Don’t do it again,” George pokes at him, “Don’t, I don’t sound like that.”

“Okay, George.”

“XD!”

“I’ll stop.” XD says, “I’ll stop! But you have to make a deal with me.”

“What kind of deal? Those rarely work out in the human’s favor when we deal with divinity.”

“It’s an easy deal.” XD explains, “I want a promise. A promise that you’ll be my best friend.”

“Best friend?” George blinks, “I already have one of those, XD.”

“I don’t need to be *your* best friend,” XD says and it honest to the gods sounds like he’s pouting, “But I want you to be mine. Promise?”

“And you’ll stop being so sassy if I say yes?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Just promise, George.”

George hems and haws for a while, until he’s got XD practically begging him, before he finally relents.

“Okay, god-boy. I’ll be your best friend.”

“You promise?”

“I promise.”

XD picks George up, just once, to turn him in an excited circle, and then drops him quickly and backs up.

“Sorry.”

“It’s okay.” George tries to say, but he’s too busy laughing so hard he has to bend over and brace his hands on his knees.

They bicker as they stroll through the woods. George realizes at one point that he’s possibly gone too far from camp but, when he reorients himself, he realizes that XD has simply been herding him in a big circle. He’s as close to camp as he was when they started walking. His heart, which had begun to pound at the thought of Sapnap being properly alone, calms.

And then he hears, within shouting distance, Sapnap’s panicked cry.

“George!?”

“Oh, fuck,” he looks at XD, eyes wide, “Hide!”

“George!” Sapnap yells, and the fear in his voice is enough to send George running. Fuck. Fuck, he’d meant to be back before Sapnap woke up. He’d lost track of time, walking around with XD.

He bursts into camp just as Sapnap looks ready to tear off in the opposite direction, eyes big and wide and so, so scared.

George feels guilt churn in his gut, bitter like his medicine and heavy, “Sapnap! I’m okay!”

“Where were you!?” Sapnap demands, voice still pitched high with panic, “I - I woke up and you were - I thought you were - George, what the fuck!?”

“Sorry!” George immediately throws his hands up, “Sorry, I was just - just peeing! I had to pee, like, *so bad*. And poop. I had to pee and poop and it was weird to do it, like, right here, so I went. Away.”

“George.” Sapnap says severely. “We are being hunted. By the entire country.”

George wilts. “Sorry.”

“...it’s fine.” Sapnap shakes his head, turning away. George watches him, sad. He misses Sapnap, even when he’s standing right in front of him. He hasn’t heard Sapnap laugh, not once, since they ran. His smile is rare, where it used to be near-constant. He’s getting thinner, not eating as much even when food is available, and he always looks *so* tired.

“Hey,” George tries, “We still have a good start. You could rest a little more. I won’t leave again.”

“No.” Sapnap starts to disassemble the tent. “We’ve still got weeks before we reach the sea to get to Snowchester. I’ll sleep when we’re safe.” Sapnap pauses, hands still on the tent. He doesn’t look at George when he ducks his head, “Thank you, though.”

“No problem.” George says helplessly and then helps break down the little camp.

George doesn't mean for it to become a pattern. He just...

Okay, yes, he's a big boy, he can admit it! He's allowed! He likes XD! He thinks XD is sort of funny, and it's endearing, watching him learn new things every time they sneak away together. He likes that XD lets him boss him around but never lets him actually get away with anything, he likes that XD is secretly sort of sharp, that every once in a while George will say something that will actually get XD to retort with a little heat. George can admit he is an instigator and, with Sapnap being as tired and stressed and bereaved as he is, George hasn't had a chance to flex the fun of winding someone up in a while.

XD is a perfect target.

So they just...have fun. And yeah, Sapnap gets angry when he realizes that George has snuck away while he slept again, but never angry enough that George really has to think about not doing it anymore. Mostly he just looks a little defeated, which hurts George, but George isn't someone who can just...sit in place. He isn't a hunter, or a fighter, or even a particularly good politician. He likes to explore and see what he can find, and he'd go crazy, stuck in a camp all night and stuck trekking at a fast pace down a beaten path all day.

So he doesn't mean for it to become a pattern, but it does, him sneaking off while Sapnap sleeps to hang out with XD. And, for a time, the pattern is fine - it's only that the mercs catch him, which isn't great.

The first time it happens, it happens as such:

He's with XD, who has climbed - not floated, *climbed*, because George goaded him - into a tree and is peeking down at George through the branches, mask surrounded by bushy leaves.

George is pointing and laughing, a little loud for that time at night, but XD exudes *something* that keeps mobs away so George isn't worried. As long as George doesn't wander too far from camp so Sapnap stays safe in the radius of XD's aura or whatever, it's totally fine.

Things are calm and normal, and then XD is dropping like a stone, "*George!*" echoing in the forest so loud that George doesn't doubt Sapnap has awoken.

He barely has a chance to flinch as XD descends, cloak billowing out like giant wings as he slips off the top of the tall branches with speed. George thinks he's fallen, somehow, until he hears the shriek behind him as XD flies over his head -

He turns with a start to find two women and a man; why they thought it was safe to travel at night, George would never know, but he can see by their mismatched armor that they're mercenaries, maybe bandits. Either way, one is dead before XD even reaches the ground, head cleanly removed by what George realizes is an enchanted wooden sword.

"*Prime.*" he says, and then XD grabs the other two by one shoulder each and they drop to the dirt limply in one pile.

"That was efficient." he hesitates, "What did you...do to them?"

"Sent their souls to the Nether." XD drops his hands to his side, "Are you okay?"

"What's the Nether?" George asks instead of answering. Of course he's okay, no one had even touched him.

“It’s where - I was. He was.”

“He?”

“The human.” XD clarifies, “It is where he was trapped when he fought the god. The realm from which I got my power.”

“And you...sent those mercs there?”

“Their souls, yes.”

George looks down at their bodies, frowning. “Bring them back, XD.”

“Why?”

“I don’t like the idea of any humans there. The Nether. That isn’t right. Bring them back, please.”

XD hesitates, but he kneels in the end and puts his hands on the bodies again. Between one blink and the next, both of them are screaming.

“No!” the man yanks himself away from XD, rolling across the ground until he scrambles up on all fours and scuttles away, into the darkness of the forest, “No, no!”

The woman just twists and screams, hands coming up to claw at XD’s arm. XD steps back, standing next to George as they both watch her writhe with a silent shriek before going still, eyes rolling into her head.

“That place isn’t very good, is it?” George asks quietly, unable to take his eyes away. He watches her chest rise and fall rapidly before going totally still.

“No.” XD agrees, “It is not very good at all.”

“...did he suffer much?” George can’t help but ask, “Your human?”

“Every day.” XD pauses. “Time passes differently in the Nether. He waited years, suffering each day. What these humans faced, he also faced.”

“That’s...” George swallows, staring as the woman finally goes still, having passed out from whatever fright was holding her hostage. “That’s awful, XD. I’m so sorry.”

“You will never face the Nether alone.” XD slowly turns George to look at him, hands on his shoulders and very gentle. “When you return to the throne, I will be by your side.”

“I won’t return to the throne, XD.” George shrugs his hands off, now very used to XD’s casual assumptions or demands for George to go back to the castle. “Besides, we should probably talk about that, uh, sending souls with a touch thing, that’s a little fucked -”

“George!” He hears through the forest. Everything had happened so fast, barely a minute or two had passed between XD falling - plenty of time for Sapnap to wake up, notice that he was gone, panic, and rush through the forest looking for him. Fuck.

“Hide,” he says, unnecessarily, because XD has already melted into the surrounding trees, just as Sapnap burst through the underbrush, Nightmare drawn.

“George!”

“Sapnap!” George waves, “I’m okay!”

“I -” Sapnap draws to a stop in front of him, panting. He looks panicked and harried, eyes wide and hair a mess from probably jolting out of a dead sleep. “I heard - that voice, did you hear -”

“Voice?” George frowns, making his voice purposefully curious, “What voice?”

“I thought I heard...his...voice...” Sapnap trails off, slowly dropping Nightmare, “I...”

George feels a pang of guilt. Sapnap heard *a* voice, for sure. But it was just XD, not...not whoever Sapnap was looking for.

He doesn’t look over at the bodies, hopefully hidden in the bush of the forest floor, doesn’t want to bring Sapnap’s attention to them. Instead, he drapes an arm around Sapnap’s shoulders, turns him away and back toward camp.

Sapnap looks too lost to even get mad at him for wandering.

“Maybe you were dreaming.” He says as he leads him.

“Yeah.” Sapnap agrees, sounding just a little broken. George gets them back to camp, forces Sapnap to sit back in bed. He carefully takes Nightmare from Sapnap’s loose grip, the hilt warming rapidly in his palm. He thinks it must be a demon-human thing, that it stays so cold for Sapnap but warms up for him, like it senses that the cool would be more comfortable for Sapnap and the warm more comfortable for him. He sets Nightmare next to the bed, sits on the edge.

“Sorry.” Sapnap says, “I know you don’t want to talk about it.”

“It’s fine.” George promises, soft, “Just sleep. You need rest.”

Sapnap closes his eyes. George sees tears gathering at the corners of his eyes and it ravages him. He thumbs them away but doesn’t press when Sapnap turns on his side to hide his face.

“Don’t go.” Sapnap mumbles, and it sounds a bit like a plea. “George, don’t.”

“I won’t.” George promises and he means it this time. He won’t leave again. That was close; it scared him. When he’s with XD, he knows he’s safe, but Sapnap running through the woods in the middle of the night - that’s dangerous. He could have left XD’s sphere of protection in his dash to find George without realizing it and run into mobs.

He watches Sapnap sleep, once his breathing evens out again. Still, he looks so drawn in rest. George wishes he could take his pain away, or truly understand it, but George...George hasn’t lost much. His parents, yes, but he loved them distantly. Having them gone isn’t much different from having them there, and he was never close to either of them, as much as he misses them. His real family had always been Sapnap and Bad and Skeppy, and Puffy before she’d left for the sea again. His way of life had been lost, yes, but he’d wanted to leave that for years. Years and years, he’d dreamed of just taking Sapnap and running away, escaping before the throne could come for him. He got his wish, in a warped, awful, way. He and Sapnap were going to Snowchester and they could build a simple, good life there, away from the dangers of the throne and the responsibility of kingship.

George brushes Sapnap’s bangs from his forehead, smiles when they just fall right back down, and then stands up and goes to the fire to build it back up. The torches and XD are enough, but he wants the safety of the fire right now, an extra precaution.

XD is waiting along the edges of the camp, sitting peacefully just past the torch line.

George joins him as usual, mirroring him from within the camp.

“Is Sapnap okay?” XD asks, when George has settled down.

“Mhm,” George glances over his shoulder at the tent, watches the curl of Sapnap’s shoulder. “He’s okay. As okay as he can be. He’s sad.”

“Oh.” XD looks over George’s shoulder and George gets the feeling he’s looking very intently.
“Sad?”

“He lost someone.” George explains, “And he hasn’t had time to grieve properly.”

“Oh.” XD says again and looks away, back at George. “Are you okay?”

“Me?” George expected the question but it still makes him smile. “XD, I’m fine. Nothing even happened to me.”

“You were upset, earlier.”

“Well,” George hesitates, “I think we need to have some rules in place. For if I’m in trouble.”

“We don’t follow rules very well.”

“We’ll have to follow these.” George says firmly, “Because it’s important. That you don’t do that again.”

“Do what? Protect you?”

“Send *souls* to the *Nether*, XD. That’s not okay. You can’t do that.”

XD huffs, but gives in, “Fine. I won’t.”

“Thank you.” George says sincerely and leans forward to pat XD’s knee. “The second rule is that unless you think I’m *really* in trouble, I don’t want you to interfere.”

“Don’t ask that of me.” XD sits up straight, “George -”

“Just listen.” George interrupts, “It’s fine, when we’re out alone, if I’m in real danger. But unless my life is threatened, just let Sapnap and I handle it, okay? *Especially* if Sapnap is around. I don’t want him to see you, okay? You’ll only upset him, a demigod connected to the place we’re running so far from.”

“I would upset him?” XD frowns. George has grown used to guessing his expressions based on the tone of his voice and that’s definitely a frown. “He wouldn’t like me? Would I...would I scare him?”

“No, he probably would not like you.” George admits, “He doesn’t like much these days. As for scaring him...a little, I think, yeah. You’re sort of scary. Maybe once we’re settled, if you still want to hang around, I’ll introduce you. We can do it slow.”

XD looks over his shoulder at Sapnap again and then back to George, nodding slowly.

“I will not show myself to him, then, or interfere,” XD agrees, “Unless you’re in imminent danger.”

"Or Sapnap." George adds immediately, "You'd protect him, too, right?"

"I..." XD trails off and George does not like that at all.

"You want me to be happy, don't you?" He crosses his arms, "Then you have to protect him. He's the most important person in the world to me, XD. I'd die without him. Understand?"

"I understand."

"Promise me." George leans forward, face serious, "You'll protect him, just like you would me, XD, promise me."

"Of course, George." XD drops his voice, sounding so very human. "I'd do anything to make you happy. I promise I'll protect Sapnap, too."

George blooms, grinning so wide it hurts. He hears XD breathe in sharply behind the mask.

"Thank you." He touches XD's hands, squeezes his fingers, "Thank you, XD."

"Whatever you want," XD promises, "If it's within my power, I'll do it for you."

"That's a dangerous thing to say to me," George warns him, "I'm spoiled."

"Good." XD catches his hand and laces their fingers together. George lets him, curious. His heart picks up speed, starts to pound in his chest. He feels - excited and flustered but totally at peace all at once. XD's hand in his feels like an echo, but one he can finally grasp. "I'll keep it that way."

"Stop." George scoffs, "You're such an idiot, XD."

His head aches sharply and he winces, but XD simply brings his free hand to George's temple and rubs a soothing circle with his thumb. Every time he does this, George's sudden migraines disappear and he feels calm, relaxed. It really is better than the medicine.

"I know." XD admits, "I know."

George runs into Karl and Quackity by accident. He's strolling the forest with XD, enjoying the cool night air and the trust he has that he and Sapnap are completely safe from mobs despite how many he hears, when XD says "There are two people coming."

"Mercs?" George blinks, turning back toward camp, but he pauses when XD shakes his head and then cocks it in a direction.

"They are...talking about their safety. They didn't make camp and now it's too late. They're going to travel through the night."

"Oh. We should help them." George decides, "How close are they?"

"Coming closer." XD hesitates, "Are you sure it is safe -"

"I've got you," George reminds him and draws his sword. He'd brought it on the walk so he could compare the diamond sword to XD's wooden one but doesn't want to cause any panic by showing up armed with a diamond blade so he sets it down gently. Just his bow is fine. "Remember where I left this, okay? I'll come back for it."

XD doesn't respond, his silence uneasy, but George knows he'll remember.

“Okay, lead the way.” George nudges him with an elbow, “But don’t be seen, okay? I don’t want to explain demigodhood to a couple of strangers in a forest. I’m not a creep.”

“I’m not a creep!” XD complains, “Stop calling me creepy, I’m not!”

“Okay, creep.” George teases, if only to make XD huff again.

XD grumbles as he’s led toward the travelers, beginning to pick up the rise and fall of their voices. If George is honest with himself, he’s mostly going because he wants to just talk to new people, maybe get an update on the world that doesn’t come from Bad’s well-meaningly sanitized hand.

He finds them in under five minutes and takes a moment to look them over. There are two, as XD said, and neither are particularly intimidating. One is a bit taller, maybe taller than Sapnap, even, but not nearly as tall as XD, and wearing a cloak meant to cause headaches, even with George’s limited visual palette. It’s a clash of patterns and colors, all stitched together in random orientations that don’t match up at all. He’s got curly brown hair and holds the torch in one hand high above their heads, carefully peering around as they walk and talk, voices low so they don’t attract mobs. The other sticks close to the torch-wielder’s back, iron sword in hand. He’s got a scar, prominent and, George can tell immediately, magic-made, that crosses out one of his eyes and turns it pearly blue. He looks stressed, but he answers when asked questions and it’s his voice that George could make out earlier. Even trying to be quiet, his voice carries just a little.

George glances at XD. “We’re gonna help them.”

“Yes, George.” XD sighs, put-upon, and melts out of sight. George watches him go, grinning, and then shakes himself out and casually tumbles into their line of sight, blinking at them curiously.

“Oh, hello,” he says.

“What the fuck.” The shorter of the two says, and George has a feeling he’ll get along with them great.

He doesn’t care about where they end up. Snowchester, the Badlands, it’s all the same to him. He has some ideas about a garden, maybe, and a nice little house on some land, but he isn’t married to any of it. The only constant, the only thing he really cares about, is that Sapnap is there. Sapnap and, now, XD, but George doesn’t want to think about that addition too much. It scares him, a little, the things he’s feeling for XD; though perhaps that isn’t true. What scares him is how easy it was to fall, how easy it is to hear XD say “I’ll always be with you” and believe him, how natural and right it feels to be in - in this sort of feeling. XD makes him feel like something was missing and George hadn’t noticed until XD had shown up to fix the problem before George had even realized there *was* one.

George is - happy. Wandering the country with his best friend, with XD always at his side even if not in sight. But he knows Sapnap isn’t. He knows Sapnap hasn’t been happy in a long time.

It’s why he’s made it his mission to get Sapnap to laugh more, loosen up a little. Yes, George may be the main and biggest stressor in Sapnap’s life but that’s because Sapnap worries about every step George takes. And all that stress is going to kill his knight before either of them have a chance to enjoy their apolitical farm. If he’s gotta throw himself off of a few rocks to force Sapnap to have some fun, so be it.

He sits on a stone close by while he waits for Sapnap to help Karl and Quackity down, already feeling a grin starting to curl at his lips.

“They make you happy.” XD says from where he’s hidden himself in a crevice.

“They make Sapnap happy.” George corrects gently, watching the way Karl swings in Sapnap’s arms and settles unnecessarily close, laughing all the while. Sapnap is trying not to show it but George can see the simple amusement he’s hiding. He sees the way Sapnap’s hands linger on Karl’s hips, the way Karl leans into the touch and throws an arm around Sapnap’s shoulders.

“Karl writes during the night.” XD tells him quietly, “In an enchanted book. I think he is sending letters, but I can’t follow the magic. Quackity, too.”

“He’s a librarian.” George points out, “Both of them are. I wonder what they write about.”

“Stories? Observations? Our movements?”

“XD,” George glances down at XD, grinning, “Are you worried?”

“No.” XD scoffs, “I can protect you from anything.”

“I know.” George nods, “So don’t stress. You’re beginning to sound just like Sapnap. Speaking of which, he and those two are getting a little close, don’t you think?”

George watches, cheeks hurting a little from how hard he’s grinning, as Sapnap carefully helps Quackity down and then just - stands there, with his hands on Quackity’s sides, looking at him dumbly while Quackity blinks up at him. “I wish you could see this.”

XD peeks, just a little, over the edge of the crevice and hums. “His hands are starting to steam.”

“Oh my gods, you’re right,” George muffles a giggle, “That’s so cute. Oh no, Sapnap has a crush.”

“On both of them?”

George watches Sapnap step back like he’s been shocked, hands falling away with a flush rising to his cheeks, and then Quackity and Karl high five while Sapnap shakes his head.

“Yeah, I suppose so.” George smirks when Sapnap turns to find him, face still red, and stands up, “See you, XD. Stay safe, okay?”

“I will, George.” XD says, a little soft, as George walks toward his friends.

George doesn’t think that he was supposed to hear Karl and Sapnap’s conversation, thunder carrying the words to him as if leaves on the wind. He spends the next hours wide awake, exhaustion long forgotten as his mind whirls with half-formed plans and ideas. There is only one that he can be certain will work. And it’s the one that Sapnap will hate the most.

But...George remembers the harsh winter when Sapnap was fourteen. He had been strong, well into his training, but the cold and the wet got into his lungs, into his bones. He hadn’t told anyone how his skin burned even higher than normal with fever, how his breath rattled between his ribs; not until he collapsed during his warm-up exercises in the middle of a snowstorm. There was a desperate few weeks, right through the midwinter celebrations, that George never left his friend’s side. It was so close that they had to call Bad back from a diplomatic trip to Snowchester, hoping that he would know how to soothe the choking coughs, the cold that had seeped into Sapnap and almost doused his flame for good.

Even knowing what might happen, George knows Sapnap would do it. He’d venture into the storm,

if it meant he could find them something.

Sapnap pulled through then, when he was a child. They had a warm, dry place for him to recover and a full fire demon carefully feeding his inner flame day and night, and people to help him eat food designed for his illness. Here, without food or much firewood and no way to perform the intricate internal fire-feedings, George can't be sure that he'd pull through again. And after all that's happened, after everything Sapnap has sacrificed and everything George has done to keep him away from the throne's clutches, he's not losing him to some fucking rain.

Sapnap would do it for him. That's all the knowledge George needs to make his decision.

"George," Sapnap whispers at some point in the night, gently shaking his shoulder to wake him up. George is awake, staring at the wall, but he pretends to stretch out and hum as if just coming to.

"My time?" he asks, letting his voice stay soft and sleepy.

"Yep." Sapnap pats his shoulder, "You good to do it? Need more sleep?"

"No." George shakes his head and sits up, pushing Sapnap down to take his place, "I'm okay. Rest up, Sap."

Sapnap yawns, showing how tired he is, and immediately curls up in the warmth George left behind. George takes a moment to adjust Sapnap's cloak, let it fall over him carefully and securely, and then goes to the fire.

He waits until he hears Sapnap's steady breathing join Karl and Quackity's, and then George scrawls a note by the dim light of their tiny fire, the thunderstorm a consistent darkness that leaves him struggling to make out his own words. He hopes Sapnap will believe him when he says he'll come back. He hopes Sapnap will forgive him for it.

He takes one more look at his friend, sleeping peacefully in his bed, and then takes a steady breath and walks out of the cave.

Even with the cloaks that he has thrown over himself, even as he takes a few more deep breaths to prepare, he is not expecting the sheer onslaught that the storm hits him with. He is almost knocked sideways, staggering off and away from the cave entrance, only just catching himself in time.

Rain streams down his face, through his hair and dripping down his back, but he only has one goal in mind. He gets far enough away from the mouth that he knows the storm will eat his words before he stops.

"XD!" He screams, thunder bracketing his words, the flashfire of lighting bringing the whole, terrifying situation into the light. He is standing on the edge of a mountain, storm all around him, screaming for a demigod.

"XD!"

"George."

XD floats six feet away, over the edge of the cliff, his cloak falling away into nothing. The wind does not buffer him, even the rain seems to slide off him, down from a duck. His mask is blinding in the dark of the storm, bleached bone white. George hasn't seen him in days, over a week. He's missed him - his heart has ached, knowing XD might be sitting just out of sight, unable to reach him in the little cave, drenched in the cold and all alone.

To see him is a relief. But George senses a change in the air, something that is not just the charged sharpness of electricity.

“What are you doing.” His voice is flat. It is not a question.

“Going to find food!” George says, shouting to be heard over the rain, “We need food, we’ll starve before the storm clears! Will you help me?”

“It is dangerous here. You need to go home.” XD’s voice has changed, and it trembles with all the power of an earthquake, of an avalanche on the precipice of falling. **“You must claim what you left behind.”**

“D-Do we have to have this conversation *now!*?!” George demands through chattering teeth.

XD is unmoved.

“It’s dangerous *there!*” George finally explodes back, just as thunder cracks overhead. He knows XD can hear him. “I can’t go back, XD, I *can’t!* I’m sorry, but I won’t lose him! Not to this storm, not to starvation, and not to that fucking throne! I *won’t!*”

The very air around George crackles. It thrums in time to his heartbeat, panicked and burning with the exertion of standing in the middle of the freezing storm. George sees the lightning strike XD before his vision goes white. His limbs ache, but the shock runs through each and every one of his muscles, spasming and sending him to his knees, hands skidding on the sharp, slippery rock. Beside him, in front of him, he sees the loose rocks and stones start to shake, before they *rise*, pushing against gravity.

“You are a child,” XD booms, his voice thunder, a death knell. **“And you do not understand. You will learn you cannot outrun your fate. This power is your birthright. This sacrifice is his.”**

It hurts to hear XD’s voice like this. It sounds like a thousand temple bells crashing against each other, discordant, nails against chalkboard, the echo of a roar. George is fairly sure his ears are bleeding.

Electricity dances across his skin in the aftermath of the strike, and he cries out, the sharp pain a shock in his fast-numbing hands. Still, he raises his head, to where XD hangs; impassive, omnipresent.

“He’s always fought for me.” George says, and even though he can’t hear his own words over the storm, he knows XD can, “I’m not a prince, and he’s still fighting for me. I have to fight for him too. I’m sorry, XD. I’m sorry, but I can’t go back.”

George thinks of Sapnap’s hollow, grief-stricken face. He thinks of his exhausted shoulders, the smile that he has to now coax out of him when before it came so easily. He thinks of the third, the fifth ration, a penance for a price that Sapnap paid, for him. He thinks of the brief moments where he can see Sapnap allowing himself happiness with Karl and Quackity. He thinks of the first time Karl said something that made Sapnap laugh, the first time he’d heard his laugh in months and how it had been so *good* to hear before Sapnap had ruthlessly cut himself off. He thinks - no, he *knows*, that Sapnap has always, *always*, deserved better than him. So he will run, wherever and whenever Sapnap wants, if only to save him from whatever fate befell the human that XD once was.

“Even you, XD,” George admits to the rocks at his knees, unable to look at the being of

unimaginable power that he can admit to himself that he loves, perhaps more than he's loved anything or anyone before, save one. "I'd fight you for him."

With the rain, he cannot hear the gentle step as XD sets down on the cliff's edge in front of him but he can see the way the cloak gathers, falls like leaves as XD kneels, holding out a gloved hand.

"George." XD says, his voice back to normal, sounding sad and pained, "You don't need to."

"XD," George breathes out, teeth beginning to chatter so hard he can barely speak, "Y-Y-You ssss-scared me."

"I'm sorry." XD lifts an arm and his cloak gently floats until he's blocking George from the downpour, gathering him close. George goes with a muffled sob, the heat of scared tears warming his cheeks as he lets XD hold him.

"You still need to return to the throne," XD says, "but I will not force you to return. I am... I am sorry that I made you afraid. I...I don't know what came over me. I promised you'd never need to fear me."

"You p-p-promised," George gets out, "T-t-to protect Sapnap, too."

"I did." XD agrees, and warmth begins to flow from the hand he has pressed to George's back. It doesn't dry him off, but it chases away the worst of the chill making his teeth chatter and his limbs shake. He sags helplessly into XD's arms, sniffles. He's always been such an easy crier, especially in the wake of a scare. Sapnap used to hold him like this, rub his back and promise to keep the scary things away, until George had calmed down enough to shove him away and complain about not needing any knight to keep him safe from boogymen.

"We need," George says, forcing his voice to remain steady, just as his mother taught him, once he's gathered himself. "We need food."

His mother also taught him that eye contact was essential. So he looks up, and into the strange, crossed-out eyes of the mask. His head pounds.

"Please," He says, and his voice cracks, "*Please.*"

"You do not need to beg," XD says, and his free hand cups George's face. "I will always be there when you need me. All you need to do is ask. I promise."

XD lowers his face and he presses their foreheads together. The mask is chilled to George's skin and George presses into the touch with a sigh, letting his eyes close. As the rain falls and the lightning slices the sky and the thunder cracks, the two of them sit in the protection of XD's cloak.

George makes it five minutes, biting his lip to hold back the angry tears before he gives up and kicks a pinecone so hard that it nearly beams Karl in the head.

"Hey!" Karl ducks nearly to his knees, eyes going wide, "I didn't do anything!"

"Sorry." George says roughly and continues stomping down the path XD is making for them.

"It's okay." Karl clumsily catches up with him, frowning, "Maybe aim for the tree next time. Or your godly boyfriend."

"He's a demigod." George corrects snippily, "He was human once, you know!"

“I didn’t know, actually.” Karl looks at him curiously, “Elaborate, if you wouldn’t mind.”

“Um.” George hesitates. He hadn’t expected any of them to ask for that. “You...aren’t angry?”

“Angry?” Karl frowns, “I mean...I think you were a little harsh on Sapnap, but he wasn’t being very kind, either.”

“You said you were on his side.”

“Of course I’m on his side.” Karl shrugs, “Have you *seen* him? Maybe he’s like a brother to you, but who wouldn’t be on his side with arms like that -”

“Stop!” George shouts, choking back a surprised laugh, “Karl!”

“What!? I’m right! Quackity will back me up on this, I used his pecs as pillows last night and it was magical!”

“I’ll throw myself into the river, Karl. I will, I’ll do it, and you can explain to both Sapnap *and* XD why!”

“Well.” Karl sniffs, “Not my fault you can’t appreciate a handsome man. I shouldn’t be surprised, apparently your tastes go more eldritch horror. Do fire demons count as eldritch, do you think?”

“Karl.” George begs, “Please.”

“Whatever!” Karl waves a hand away, “No accounting for taste. I’m always gonna be on Sapnap’s side, because he’ll stop hugging me if I’m not, but that doesn’t mean I don’t see your side, too. And, well...”

“What?” George narrows his eyes suspiciously at Karl’s shifty look.

“I, um...well, maybe I saw you disappear once. And maybe I followed you a little, and maybe saw the two of you. So.”

“*Karl!*”

“No,” Karl points at him aggressively, “No, you don’t get to turn this around on me. I thought he was just a particularly dressy suitor you were keeping a secret from your overprotective bestie, I didn’t know you had a *demigod* mooning after you! What kind of story is this!? I tell tall tales, George, I don’t live them!”

“You...” George glowers, but Karl has a point. “You didn’t tell Sapnap?”

“Once again,” Karl frowns, “I thought he was just some *guy*. I definitely would have told Sapnap if I’d noticed the floating, teleporting, talks-like-a-carillon thing!”

“Okay, well, thanks so much for keeping my secret,” George says sarcastically and Karl just flips him off.

They walk in silence for a while, XD still ahead and clearing a path for them, but the quiet isn’t uncomfortable or as tense as before. The tears have finally stopped threatening to spill, and now all George is left with is a bone-deep guilt. He’d thought keeping XD a secret from Sapnap would *help* - for both of them. Sapnap wouldn’t have been patient with XD learning and asking weird questions and *sending people to the Nether* for a bit there. And knowing XD was connected to the throne was only ever going to really upset him. George had a *plan*. They were going to get settled

in wherever they were going and then George was going to sit Sapnap down and calmly lay the whole thing out for him and let him come to terms with it before he ever actually put XD in front of him.

He hadn't expected to actually have to call XD in to save them like that. He hadn't expected to be put on the spot immediately, and hadn't expected Sapnap to get *that* upset with him, to the point that he was crying and he'd lost control so much that George hadn't even been able to stand too close to him from the heat. He'd fucked up really badly, and he'd been so out of sorts that he'd fucked up not once but *twice*. His words had gotten tangled, and things had come out all out of order and...well.

Now he was on his way to a river to haul water and Sapnap was probably still really upset back at the camp. He'd said that he didn't feel like George's friend. Sapnap had never said something like that to him before, not in the entire decade they'd known each other, not during any fight they'd ever had.

"Hey." Karl breaks him out of his thoughts, voice quiet. "He didn't mean that. The last thing he said. You know that."

"Yeah." George says but it feels like a lie.

Does he? Does Sapnap really think that? George hasn't...George can admit, he's been caught up in XD. In the way XD makes him feel. Being around XD gives him migraines sometimes, sometimes the things he says ping the little traumas in George's brain that causes his whole head to crack open until XD touches his temples and chases the pain away with a few simple words. Being with XD is like the aura before a true migraine, but George almost feels addicted to it. He'd missed him during their time in the cave, and last night he'd been able to actually...sit with him. In camp. Without hiding, or worrying about staying close enough that the camp would stay safe. XD had carefully, so carefully, slotted their fingers together while George took watch and George had leaned his head on XD's shoulder and they'd quietly talked about what XD had seen while George was in the cave. They hadn't had a chance to talk much at all, when George was making his desperate run for food; XD just helped him down the side of the cliff so they could hunt some poor creature big enough to feed them all for a few more days and then helped him back to the cave.

They'd spent a long time talking last night, and then Quackity and Karl had gone with Sapnap to sit around the fire for his watch and George had laid down on his bed and carefully pulled XD down next to him and they'd faced each other, XD's cloak draped over the both of them. The mask, moonlight or bone or whatever it looks like, was a familiar comfort.

George has dreamed about taking it off of XD for days and days, now. In his dreams, he slips his fingers under the mask and feels warm, nervous breath on his hands. He lifts the mask and there are tufts of hair and warm eyes and freckles - and that's all he knows. He can't ever remember the face when he wakes up, but he can remember the feeling that always settled in his chest, warmth and love and relief and so, so much sorrow.

But last night, there had been no sorrow. Just the two of them, sharing the breath between them, until George has slowly fallen asleep, their hands tangled.

He hadn't been a good friend to Sapnap. He hadn't realized that Sapnap had grown so close to Karl and Quackity, truly close, until he'd seen his response to sewing up Quackity's wings. He hadn't even noticed George bringing him fresh clothes to wipe blood with, just set the bloody ones on his knee to sew and picking up the new ones on autopilot, so focused was he. He hadn't realized how *deeply* Sapnap was hurting. He hadn't paid enough attention to Sapnap, the most important person in his life, and how serious he was about XD not joining them, until he'd upset him enough that

they'd had to be *separated*. Because Sapnap hadn't felt like George was treating him like a friend.

"I fucked up." He admits into the new silence. Karl doesn't answer, and that speaks enough.

They reach the river within the hour and George realizes that they don't have buckets around the same time that Karl does.

"Fuck." They say at the same time, miserably staring at the water. George contemplates just downing himself instead of dealing with any more issues caused by his own shortsightedness.

"What's the problem?" XD asks, that weird voice of his he's been using around the others. George hasn't called him on it. If he wants to make his voice intimidating to make himself feel better, George will let it go for now.

"We forgot the buckets." George rubs his face. "We'll have to go *back* and get them."

"Buckets?" XD thinks for a moment, "**If you find me big enough stones, I can make them.**"

"No way." Karl stares at him, "That's not true."

"It is." XD says, a bit defensively.

"How big do you need?" George starts to poke around. There are quite a few big stones, lying along the edges of the river and leading to a rocky outcrop that reaches out nearly halfway across the running water.

XD looks around thoughtfully and eventually wades into the river, returning with a thick stone perhaps a little bigger than a particularly round watermelon.

"This size." He says, and then holds the stone in one hand and carefully begins literally smoothing it out. Where his hand touches, the stone seems to crumble to match whatever artistic vision he has. Once the tip of the stone has been leveled, he slowly sinks his fingers into it and pulls out a handful of gravel.

"Neat." Karl says, a little faint, "I'll go find more stones."

Karl wanders off while George glares.

"I told you to take it easy." He tugs at XD's cloak until he comes to the ground, no longer floating as he carefully hollows out the stone to create a makeshift bucket.

XD answers in his true voice, with Karl out of earshot, "Relative to -"

"Relative to *transporting us across the country* is not a good measure." George cuts him off. XD looks at him, the mask hiding whatever face he's making. XD is trying to hide it but George can tell he's tired, from how quiet he'd been on the walk to the river to the easy way he lets George force him to the ground without the usual play-resistance.

"*What?*" George crosses his arm in annoyance.

"Nothing." XD shakes his head, but his voice is affectionate. "You knew what I was going to say."

"Of course I did." George snorts, "*I know you.*"

"You do." XD agrees and drops to sit on the ground in a pool of green, "I promise to not over-exert

myself. I will make six buckets.”

“Or less, if you get tired.”

“Or less.” XD promises, and it doesn’t appease George but he’ll let it go for now.

He turns to go help Karl, who is digging up a stone that looks about the right size and shape a bit farther down the bank, but he pauses as something crosses his mind. When he returns to XD’s side and drops to his knees, XD turns to look at him with his full attention, his hand even pausing mid-swipe within the new bucket.

“Yes, George?”

George licks his lips. “If...If Sapnap really doesn’t...if he says no...”

XD huffs, but it’s more amused, fond, than anything. “I will never leave you, George. If Sapnap does not want me to travel with you, we will continue as we were. I will follow, out of sight.”

“That’s so unfair.” George whispers, and he knows it’s true. Just as it would be unfair to force Sapnap to travel with XD just for George’s sake. George has put them both into this position. It’s his fault, his unwillingness to face a problem head-on, that led to this; XD finally a known variable but still relegated to an unseen presence, or Sapnap setting aside his own mental health and stability just to appease George’s desires, once again. “I’m sorry, XD. This is my fault. I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t apologize.” XD pulls his gloved hand from the bucket and cups George’s cheek, slowly tilting his face down until their foreheads are pressed together again, cool mask to sweaty flesh. “Not to me. Anything for you, George.”

“I...” George swallows. He wants to say something he shouldn’t. Not at this random river bank, when he may once again be forced to give up being at XD’s side whenever he wants.

“I know.” XD says simply. “I knew. As I’d know your atoms from all the universe, I know this, too.”

“I hate when you do that.” George lies, blinking rapidly, “I really hate it, XD. I hate you.”

“Yes, George.” XD breathes, joy leaking into his voice, “Me, too.”

“Shut up.” George shoves him, nearly toppling XD over, and stands up, dashing a hand across his face. “Finish that bucket! You have five more to do before we can go back! Don’t just mess around, XD, it’s wasting time!”

“Sorry, George.” XD laughs, curling around his stone bucket as if cowering, “I’ll get to work, George.”

“Good!” George explodes and then goes to join Karl yanking the stone from the mud.

“Good talk?” Karl asks, panting.

“Shut up.” George grumbles, rolling his sleeves up.

They find five more stones and XD carefully carves them up. They fill the water and each start out holding two. Within ten minutes, XD is holding all six and watching over them as Karl and George look around for landmarks that may help Karl find their place on the map as they walk back.

They look closely and Karl manages to spot a few things that might be helpful or seem familiar to his geographical knowledge.

About five minutes outside of camp, Karl stops them and motions to XD.

“Okay, big guy, give those here.”

“You’re not actually pretending you carried those, are you?” George asks, trying not to laugh, “Karl.”

“Shut up. I’m going to be so impressive. Quackity and Sapnap are going to be like, *wow, Karl, you have so much muscle! We didn’t realize!*” Karl brags, motioning until XD reluctantly hands over the two smallest buckets. Karl immediately sags under the weight but then forces himself to straighten up. “Do I look cool, George?”

“So cool.” George nods and, in solidarity, takes his two back from XD, as well.

“**Don’t drop them.**” XD warns but George just rolls his eyes at him and Karl doesn’t even pretend to listen, busy muttering to himself about impressing Sapnap and Quackity with his strength.

George takes a deep breath before they come back into sight of the camp. He’s going to go in, drop his buckets, apologize to Sapnap, and live with whatever decision Sapnap makes. No cajoling, no complaining. He’ll work with what he has.

When he makes it to camp, Karl is by the fire, buckets placed and flexing for Quackity, who is laughingly complimenting him.

“You carried those all the way here, huh?” Quackity grins, nodding along.

“Of course! Are you impressed? Sapnap, come tell me how impressed you are!”

“So impressed, man.” Sapnap appears from the tent, wiping his hands on a cloth. “That’s, like, really cool. I can’t believe you luggered those things all the way here.”

“For you, I’d lug the world,” Karl flutters his eyelashes and Quackity goes pink, shoving at him.

“Karl, shut up.”

“No, no, keep telling us what else you’d drag around.” Sapnap encourages, smiling. He looks calm, and like he’s having fun, and he hasn’t even looked at George yet.

“Well, so much water, for one,” Karl says as he drops to the ground and pulls out his map, “Whatever you want me to do, hotstuff, I’ll do it for you.”

“Wow,” Quackity fakes a swoon, “You’re so sweet.”

George leaves them to tease each other, carefully setting his buckets down with XD at his side. XD almost immediately returns to the edges of camp. He looks up and finds Sapnap looking at him, face no longer amused.

“We should talk.” George swallows.

Sapnap just nods. He and George step away from the fire, leaving Quackity and Karl to begin the process of purifying the water for safe drinking.

George steadies himself. He isn’t going to be selfish about this. He’s going to listen. He’s going to

reassure. He's going to validate. He's going to put Sapnap first, the same way Sapnap always puts him first.

Whatever Sapnap needs here, whether it hurts George and XD or not...that's what has to happen.

"Stop!" George nearly keels over, holding his stomach as it aches through his laughter, "Stop, stop! XD, you have to stop, you're killing me!"

"I'm not killing you," XD says with affront, finally pausing the little dance he's making the jungle cat in his arms do. The thing is practically a full-grown jaguar, fur glossy and sleek, muscles bulging and dangerous. It's been hanging limply from XD's gloved hands for nearly fifteen minutes while he swings it around like some sort of put upon barn cat, only quiet grumbles of discontent when XD gets too jovial with whatever dance move he's attempting to mimic. Neither it nor XD seem to be getting tired. George isn't sure he'd even be able to lift the damn thing, even if it let him, let alone swing it around like that. As always, he's impressed by XD's seemingly endless talents.

"With laughter." George argues uselessly, laughing louder and with more aplomb as he digs into the bit, "You're going to kill me with laughter. Look how hard I'm laughing, XD! So hard!"

"Is laughing dangerous now? Stop doing it."

"Yes, it's dangerous. Very dangerous." George can't help but tease, finally managing to sit back against the cushy spot XD had made for him when he'd complained about the hard ground earlier, "If all these mercenaries don't get me, your jokes just might."

"I won't joke anymore, then." XD gently settles the jaguar back to the ground, bonks it on the head twice like one might to a beloved pet as opposed to a wild animal that had previously been interested in making one of them a meal. It blinks up at him adoringly, George *watches* it nudge its whole head into XD's palm and then stalk off with a low, swishing tail, a bounce in each step as it disappears soundlessly.

"I was just joking." George pulls his legs up, crosses them and leans on his knees as he takes in XD just standing in the little clearing now, arms limp and hidden in his thick cloak again. It's unnatural, every part of him, from the ever-present smiling mask to the seemingly magicked cloak that never dirties and never falls from around his face, from the very air that brackets his needlessly tall self to the silence in which he exists.

"Joking? That's dangerous. It leads to laughing."

"It isn't dangerous! I was lying."

XD tilts his head slowly, playing up the bit, "Lying is dangerous."

"Everything I do is dangerous, XD. I live life on the edge. I'm a dangerous fellow, you know. It follows me. Come sit."

XD comes and sits. He drops into a kneel in front of George and it reminds him uncomfortably of when they first met, and of the knights at the castle, how they'd greet him every time they approached him. All but Sapnap, and even he would bow in public.

"No, not like that, you know that. That's kneeling. You look like a knight. I don't like it." George pushes firmly at XD's shoulders, feeling firm bulk under the thick cloak. XD lets himself be pushed back onto his butt and then he, thankfully, mirrors the way George sits so they're both

sitting crisscrossed as usual.

“See? More comfortable.”

“Comfortable.” XD pauses and then nods, “Yeah, it’s more comfortable. I liked the other way, too, though. I am a knight so I should kneel.”

“Well, not to me, you shouldn’t. No one should kneel for me anymore.” George pats XD’s knee, “I like what we are now, okay? Don’t kneel for me. I don’t like it.”

“I understand.” XD nods, “Don’t kneel for you. I’ll just do other knight stuff for you.”

“Like what?” George can’t help but ask, amused, “Protect me? You’re already doing that.”

“Yeah, like protecting you. I’ll stand next to you and stuff. Scare people.”

“You already scare people. You scare our friends all the time!”

“Do I?” XD tilts his head again. George sometimes wishes he were braver. He’d reach forward, pull that mask away, if he were like he was in his dreams. He’d see what was behind that smile and actually remember it the next time he wakes up. Instead, he tangles his own fingers together, tries to ignore the phantom feeling of a hand in his.

“Scare might be the wrong word. You’re a bit intense, is all.”

“I am?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah.”

“I don’t mean to be.”

“I know.” George leans back against the tree he’d called for himself, looks up into the foliage. He can’t see anything but inky black. If George listens, he can hear the skittering of spiders and the groans of zombies.

“Should I try to be less intense? I don’t want to scare you. Or them.”

“No, it’s okay.” George shrugs, “We know that’s just what you’re like. I think Karl thinks it’s funny, the way you just -” George mimes swinging a sword, thinking of the first time he’d seen XD fight, when he’d had nothing but a wooden sword and had still, somehow, hit that merc so hard it had decapitated her just as easily as a diamond sword would have. “And then say something weird when we’re just cutting vines.”

“Oh. Okay.” XD nods, “Then I will just be me.”

“Good.” George hesitates. It feels wrong to keep going, but he does, because it feels right, too. They aren’t at a river with their friend, this time. He can say it. “I like you when you’re just you.”

“I like you, too, George.” XD offers a hand. George takes it. It feels a little bit like burning, when XD touches him, but George has always had a bit of a fascination with fire. XD puts their palms together, interlocks their fingers. “I’ll protect you until you go back for what you left behind.”

"I'm not going back to the throne, XD." George huffs, but isn't truly annoyed. They've been traveling together for long enough that George understands that some things about XD just won't change. George wouldn't want them to. He loves XD the way he is, protective and scarily vulnerable in his openness about his feelings for George and just a little bit awkward.

XD doesn't answer. He just holds George's hand in his. George feels his own heartbeat increase, a steady tik-tik-tik up as they sit in the quiet night and hold hands. It's familiar. The phantom feeling from before is gone, replaced by this new warmth.

He looks at XD's mask, feels those little dotted eyes staring back. It's a comfort and a frustration. When he reaches up to touch it, XD lets him. It's smooth and cold, like death. It sends sparks of pain through George's temples, like many things about XD do. He pushes past it, because he doesn't want to drop his hand.

"Will you ever show me your face, XD? My loyal knight?"

"When you've gone back for what you left behind, you'll see my face." XD catches his hand, holds it up to the mask and allows him to cup the cheek. "Until then, no. There's nothing behind this mask for you."

George sighs and lets go of the night's urge to uncover the mystery. It will be back by the morning. For now, though, he can be content like this. Though the mask is cold, XD's hands are warm and powerful. They make George feel safe.

They sit in silence again for a long time. George eventually takes his hands back, crosses them against the slight chill of the jungle night. XD sits in front of him, blocking most of the breeze.

George is beginning to get tired, his eyelids heavy, the next time XD speaks.

"I liked that."

"Liked what?" George blinks awake, finds that XD has moved closer, has set himself up as a comfortable place to lean against so George takes advantage and burrows into the warmth of his side.

"When you called me yours."

"Mine?"

"Your knight, you said."

"Oh." George leans his head on XD's shoulder, gets comfortable and adjusts them both as needed. XD lets him, as he lets George do most things. "I guess I did."

"I liked it."

George smiles before he can stop himself. He forces the smile away. Smiling feels wrong, in this situation. Not sitting here with XD, that always makes him smile, but - the situation at large. It feels wrong to smile, when Sapnap still looks so fatigued every morning and his eyes glance over XD like he isn't there. Sapnap took the high road so George wouldn't have to, again, and George let him, because he didn't want to let XD go, no matter how firmly he told himself to stay strong about it. It feels wrong to be so happy with XD, when his best friend is still so sad.

So, he tries not to smile, and he fails, but he forces it away. It feels wrong.

“I liked it.” XD repeats, stronger. His voice is so soft when it’s just them, not that rough, reverberating echo he speaks in with the others; he sounds human when they’re alone. That’s dangerous, but...like George said. He’s dangerous, too.

“I...” George trails off, not sure how he wants to continue. How is he supposed to say that he liked it, too? Calling XD his? How is he supposed to say that it felt right, and that it just slipped out? Then again, XD probably knows. He said, days ago, that he always knows.

“I’ll be your knight.” XD turns to look at him, dislodging him from his shoulder but catching him by his upper arms in both hands. XD’s grip is firm and real and gentle in ways that these hands shouldn’t be able to be, for all the bloodshed George has seen them cause. He’d just swung a jungle cat around like it was nothing, yet he touched George with such adoration, the same adoration that cat had looked at XD with.

“I’ll be everything you need. I’ll protect you. I’ll stand by you. I’ll dance with you. I’ll keep you safe.”

“One of those things isn’t like the others, XD.” George can’t help but cut him off, feeling all the blood rushing to his face. Sometimes XD just says things and how is George meant to respond!? How is he meant to respond to stuff like this!? XD doesn’t understand what he is saying, what he sounds like! George has - George can’t remember a single time in his life when someone has spoken to him the way XD speaks to him, like George has a right to know all the soft, beautiful things XD thinks about him.

And George can’t handle that. Can’t handle how those feelings well up in his chest, nearly overwhelming. He thinks his heart might explode. So George interrupts, stops XD with a joke, and it distracts XD as much as George hoped it would.

“Which one?” XD asks, frown evident in his voice, “How come?”

“How does dancing with me relate to keeping me safe, hmm?”

“Oh.” XD thinks for a moment, “You laughed when the cat danced. So you must like dancing.”

“I laughed when the cat danced because you were swinging a fucking jaguar around like a house cat!”

“So you don’t like to dance?”

“...maybe I do. I haven’t danced in a long time. But that’s beside the point; dancing and protecting aren’t similar.”

“I want to protect you,” XD says firmly, “But I want to make you happy, too. Make you laugh. Make you smile. You have a good smile, George.”

“Oh.”

“You like to dance. But you haven’t danced in a while.” XD suddenly stands up, pulling George with him, “Dance.”

“Dance?” George looks around, half expecting XD to somehow manifest a whole dance hall, food and live band included. Nothing like that appears. “There’s no music. No place to dance!”

“George.” XD says, and he sounds amused. George wants to see what his smile might look like, beneath that mask. Somehow, he can almost - almost picture it. “Dance with me, George.”

“But -”

“George.” XD says again, soft, in that tone, that tone that he only uses when they’re alone and he’s saying George’s name like it’s fragile, like he has to be gentle with it, “Dance with me.”

He offers a gloved hand. George takes it. He’s pulled into position, a hand in his, another on his upper arm. His free hand settles on what he assumes to be XD’s shoulder blade, flesh and bone under the ever-present, bright green cloak.

“One,” XD says quietly, and pulls George along. George is meant to be leading, but he lets XD pull him into “two - three, one -” until they’re waltzing in a wide box. George falls into the familiar rhythm quickly despite the months and months since he’d last danced. He doesn’t remember the last time he danced, actually. Sapnap hates it and the last time George had danced with him, he’d been stiff and unresponsive and they’d been young teens. But he falls into it with ease and his hand slowly slides down to XD’s hip. When they come together, closing the space between them, it feels natural. Like it was always meant to be this way. It takes George only a few times to take the lead, and then he’s twirling his very own demigod around their little clearing and he’s trying not to laugh and, if he strains his hearing, he thinks XD may be humming a waltz.

“This is fun.” He admits when he’s managed to twirl XD despite their height difference, and XD comes back with an *oof* that sounds suspiciously like a laugh. “Maybe I do like dancing.”

“I’ll dance with you, then.” XD says and it sounds like he’s smiling again. “Whenever you want.”

“I want you to be louder. I can’t hear the music you’re humming.”

“I’m making it up.”

“No, it sounds familiar. Hum louder.” George says primly, and grins when XD only sighs and starts to hum again, louder.

His voice is faulty but nice, and it *is* familiar. George can’t place it, but it sounds so familiar, it fills him with so much warmth. So much homesickness. So much longing.

He finds himself leaning his head on XD’s shoulder as he listens to the music, their waltz slowing and eventually dying on the second step. They stand in their little clearing and sway and George closes his eyes against the headache forming strong and pulsing in his temples because he wants to stay here, with XD, listening to him hum. XD lets him, hums to the end and then starts all over again, until George is nearly limp in his arms from pain.

Still, he doesn’t want him to stop humming. He wants to hear this song for as long as possible. XD comes to a stop only when George burrows his face in his cloak, gloved fingers coming to press to George’s temples and rub light circles. “Your headache is back?”

“Hm.”

“Let’s go back to camp, then. Karl will have something to help. You should sleep.”

“I don’t want to stop.” George admits. “It feels like we won’t get this back.”

“We will.” XD says firmly. “I’ll always be with you, George.”

“You’re such an idiot.” George can’t help but sigh, fond, and then his head pulses so bad that his vision goes blurry, “Oh, fuck. Okay, yes, please take me back to camp. Ow. Ow, XD. It hurts.”

“Okay, okay.” XD huffs a laugh. George wishes he could feel it, that press of air in his hair. “Let’s go.”

XD holds his hand again, leads him slowly through the jungle. George follows with his eyes closed, trusting XD to keep him safe and lead him back without too much damage.

“We’re here.” XD tells him quietly when he can hear the crackling fire. He cracks open his eyes, the headache beginning to subside after he’d cut his vision off for a few minutes. XD leads him into camp by the hand, a protective arm around his shoulders, too.

Sapnap is sitting at the fire, poking the embers with a thick stick. Quackity sleeps with his head on Sapnap’s lap, Karl curled up along his back with his cloak draped over them against the slight chill of the jungle at night.

Fuck.

“Um.” George swallows when Sapnap looks up, his face unreadable. “We were just...”

XD’s hand flexes in George’s. Sapnap’s eyes drop to where their fingers are intertwined. Somehow his face locks down even more, not a thought or feeling showing in his usually expressive eyes.

“George has a migraine.” XD speaks up, and his voice is gone, changed. Back to that voice he uses in front of everyone else. Their dance, their waltz, the soft bubble of nighttime and - and...whatever else was there, finally pops.

“His medicine is in the enderchest.” Sapnap says without inflection. XD leads George to the fire and George sits across from Sapnap while XD goes to the chest. Sapnap goes back to the fire. George feels like he’s done something wrong. Something Sapnap will never tell him he did, but which he has done, nonetheless. George feels like he’s failed, somehow. He wishes Sapnap would just tell him what fucking exam he’s supposed to be taking.

XD brings him his medicine, bitter roots that George chews quickly. He accepts the water XD passes to him and pretends that its drowsy side effect comes on much quicker than usual. He falls asleep under the shade of XD’s gaze and the pointed lack of Sapnap’s.

He dreams of a waltz, a face he can’t see, a laugh he can’t hear. It’s a beautiful dream.

When he wakes up, he doesn’t remember a moment of it. Just that it felt remarkably like the bubble that had formed around him and XD when they were dancing.

It’s so fucking hot. It’s so fucking hot, George thinks he may just die, just fucking melt into a puddle of meat and bone and expire on the spot.

Still, he settles down and XD finagles some big sticks into the ground and carefully drapes his cloak up on one side to offer him and George shade. In all these weeks, it’s the first time George has ever seen any part of him under the cloak. He’s covered in a skin-tight outfit made of the same material as his gloves, as off-yellow as his cloak.

“Aren’t you hot?” he asks quietly, as if lowering his voice will lower the temperature.

“Yes.” XD says shortly, head still tilted toward the tent where they’d left Sapnap and Karl to help Quackity with his wings.

George lets him be, just leaning back and trying to adjust to the heat. He breathes in and out, forces

himself to calm down from the last day of walking. When he opens his eyes, minutes later, XD is still looking at the tent, silence thoughtful.

George takes the time to look XD over seriously.

George has been thinking about XD a lot lately. More than how he *usually* thinks about XD a lot.

Specifically, he's been thinking about the human XD once was, before the magic.

"You know." He says softly, "You watch him a lot."

"Hm?" XD turns to him, humming in confusion, "I what?"

"Sapnap." George looks at XD's mask, knows they're looking each other in the eye, even if only one way. "You watch him. When you think I'm not looking."

"What?" XD straightens up from his comfortable slouch, alarmed, "No, I don't."

"You do." George smiles, taking one of XD's hands in his. He'd lean against him as usual, but he's pretty sure they would both simply turn to paste under the oppressive heat. "It's okay."

"I don't." XD repeats, a little desperately, "I don't."

"Don't lie to me." George reprimands softly. "It's okay. You...you knew him. Didn't you?"

His head begins to pulse but he ignores it. He thinks he's finally beginning to connect some dots. Not all of them, but a few.

"George, please." XD whispers, "Don't."

"You did." George nods. "I thought so. You care about him. Still."

"I..." XD turns back to the tent. "Every day that I'm with you, the part of me that was him...the human...he comes out a little stronger. His emotions become clearer. Not just his - my - our love for you -" George allows that to pass without a word, not ready to open that can - "but...but other things. Other loves."

"And you loved Sapnap. When you were human."

"I still -" XD speaks up immediately, only to trail off. "There is a part of me. That loved him. Loves him."

"Is that why you change your voice when you're around them? So he doesn't recognize you behind that mask? Are you who he -" George starts to ask, only for his head to *pulse*. He lets out a soft cry, hands immediately flying to his head. "Oh, fuck,"

"No more questions." XD says firmly. He pulls George to his side and though it is heinously hot, the immediate relief George feels at the fingertips against his temples makes it worth it.

George lets it go, along with the threads he was just beginning to twine together. He won't forget this. He *won't*. He'll hold onto this, as hard as he can, and when it's safe and they're settled in the Badlands, he'll keep asking questions until he gets to the bottom of this.

No matter how much it hurts.

“Sapnap!” George cries, desperate, but Sapnap disappears into the trees in a blur. Karl and Quackity are frozen looking between where Sapnap has disappeared and where George cradles XD close. “W-why are you just standing there!? Go after him!”

Karl bolts but Quackity hesitates, looking at George worriedly. “You’re okay?”

George nods tightly, “Please, just...take care of him.”

Every part of George wants to follow Quackity as he runs after Karl and Sapnap, but his need to protect XD keeps him on the ground, holding XD and trying to understand what’s happening.

“XD.” He says carefully. “Please. Please explain to me what’s going on. I don’t understand.”

“George...I don’t think that would be a good idea. The memories were stolen. To attempt to uncover them would cause only pain.”

“So I won’t remember. Tell me like a story.” George clutches at his shoulders, “Please, you’ve told stories before. Just tell me a story. *Please.*”

“George...”

“*Please, XD.*” George bows his head, tears falling freely. He can’t get the look of devastation on Sapnap’s face out of his head. The betrayal, the grief. He’d watched the light finally go out in Sapnap’s eyes. He doesn’t understand. He *has* to understand, no matter how painful. “I’m begging you, XD. For me. Tell me a story.”

XD breathes in and out and George feels every moment of it, as closely as they’re holding each other. XD’s hand drops from his temple to his cheek, cupping his face in such a gentle hold it makes George cry harder.

“George,” XD coos, “Please, don’t cry. Don’t beg. You never have to do these things. Of course, I’ll tell you. You won’t like this story, though. The ending is not a happy one. Nor is the middle.”

“Is the beginning?”

“...In some ways.”

“Just tell me, XD.”

“Yes, George.” XD says softly and carefully, slowly, painfully sits up. The wound is healed, technically, but George can’t bring himself to look at it. He’ll throw up, and he’s still so weak, still in shock from his own stabbing. His brain simply skirts the memory, already beginning to dark the edges of how it felt for Tommy’s sword to slide through him.

“Once upon a time,” XD begins, voice empty and void, “There was a human boy. His name was Dream. He grew up in the castle, alongside his two very best friends. One was his partner, his fellow knight-in-training, to be forever at his side. The other was his prince. Dream had seen the prince once, when they were both children, and loved him from the first time their eyes had met.”

“Oh, good.” George presses his face to XD’s shoulder, trying his best to *not* try his best to remember things he has no power over remembering, “A happy beginning, at least.”

“The happiest.” XD agrees wistfully. “They grew up together. They were inseparable from the moment they met. But there was something special that developed between him and the prince. Dream was earnest in his love and the prince...after years of friendship and laughter, the prince fell

in love too.”

“No.” George denies, a low moan of pain, “XD, no.”

“Yes. Dream and his prince fell in love. The kind of love that they tell stories about when the night is cold and the fire is warm. The kind of love that breaks thousand-year-old curses. The kind of love that leads to stupid, stupid acts of bravery. You see, the prince was not happy.”

George weeps. He does not remember, but he finally *recognizes* - just as XD had told him to do, months ago.

“The prince was not happy.” XD repeats over the soft sounds of him, “He did not want to be king. He wanted to take his two dear friends and escape. He wanted to build a farm, a house. Marry Dream and stay with their friend and lead a simple life, away from the worries of kingship and the dreaded throne, which he knew could take one of his friends at any time.

“And then the worst happened. A coup. Instigators stormed the castle, an attempt to end the monarchy. Dream knew what had to be done. He sent his partner away to keep him safe and went to the throne room. He was going to destroy the throne before it had the chance to hurt his prince, his beloved. But he was too late. The prince was already with the throne, having been driven there by circumstance. Dream was drawn to the throne against his will. It was his duty, as the special guard of the prince, raised from near birth to always be with him, to sacrifice himself to the throne. The prince would accept his kingship, enter the Nether, and save him, cementing his commitment to the people and the land and continuing the agreement between the royal family and the power that placed them upon the throne.”

“To feed it.” George echoes the words not spoken. The words his mother had told him once, when he was young. That he would one day lose someone he loved to the throne and would, in turn, sacrifice a piece of himself in order to have his loved one returned to him. His love would power the throne, give him the magic he needed to rule, to have the same authority she did.

“Yes.” XD nods, “Yes, exactly. Dream was drawn in, but the prince denied his birthright and took up Dream’s sword. He struck the throne and drew the Warden, who was the vessel through which the throne manifested in the Nether. Dream and the prince and the Warden fought and the Warden was wounded. This wound released a power not meant for the overworld, where you reside. The recoil was too great. The prince’s memories of Dream were stolen and Dream was dragged to the Nether with the Warden, where he was imprisoned until the prince came for him.”

It hurts. It hurts *so much*. But if he closes his eyes, he can almost picture bright green eyes, wide with horror, with fear, and the feeling of a familiar hand slipping out of his.

George covers his mouth, sobbing too loudly to hear what XD is attempting to say. XD gives him a moment, lets him cry himself out until he’s got nothing left but soft hiccups and sniffles.

“But the prince did not come. With his memories gone, how was he to even know that his beloved was missing, let alone that he was trapped? The prince and Dream’s partner ran away from the castle together, to protect each other from the throne’s desire of George’s heart. And so, Dream waited. Time passes differently between the Nether and the overworld. Days, he waited. Days turned to weeks. Weeks to months. Months to over a year. Dream began to grow angry. At first, he was furious. He felt abandoned. He felt left behind. His prince nor his partner, neither came to his rescue. And then he grew worried. Had something happened to them? Were they alive? Had they died in the coup, while he was locked away and unable to protect them? Was it simply too dangerous to rescue Dream? Would they one day put themselves in danger in an attempt to retrieve him? For months and months, the thoughts tormented him.”

“Please.” George clears his throat, “Please, XD. Move on. I can’t...I can’t -”

“One day,” XD conceded, “Dream grew tired of waiting. He decided he would escape of his own accord. During his second year trapped in the Nether, someone attempted to sit upon the throne. This attempt was by a citizen of the kingdom, one Wilbur Soot. The throne, wounded from the prince’s attack, desperate for a heart to heal the damage done, opened the Nether to accept Wilbur’s sacrifice. Dream took his chance. He fought the Warden again and killed him once the portal was opened. The magic within the Warden, with nowhere else to go, went to Dream. Their goals aligned. Dream and the throne both wanted to find the prince. Dream and the throne both wished that the prince would return and rescue him. But Dream, more than anything, wanted to keep his beloved safe. Wanted to -”

“Make him happy.” George finishes for him, voice choked.

“And so, a new creation was born. One with a human’s heart but magic’s mind. A demigod. He returned Wilbur’s sacrifice to him and fled the castle in search for his prince. He did not know how to find him at first, until he heard the prayers. A voice he recognized. Dream’s partner, leaving daily offerings and calls for his return. The demigod was no longer Dream, but his newfound godhood heard when he was being bid and followed. That was how he found his prince. He did not have a name, until his prince named him after the pattern on his mask.”

“XD.” George shakes his head, “I...I don’t know...”

“The prince didn’t remember the human that the demigod once was.” XD continues, voice distant and quiet, “But that was okay. The demigod would stay with him. Perhaps the prince could love him, as he loved Dream. And the prince was with his dear friend, who Dream had missed so much. The demigod did not know happiness, though he remembered it from Dream. But the prince taught him what it felt like to love something for himself. Not the memories given to him from his time as a human, but as himself, the new being he was. Because of the prince, the demigod learned how to love Dream’s partner, and their new friends for himself. Learned to love existing as he was instead of simply chasing the goals of what he had been. The end.”

George can’t breathe. Finally, he understands why Sapnap has been grieving all this time. Finally, he understands who Sapnap lost. Finally, he feels the true loss of that night after months of escaping the toll that Sapnap has been suffering all this time. And even now, as George grieves, he knows that it is still not the same. Sapnap has lost Dream and remembers every agonizing edge of that loss - George is grieving for what he doesn’t have. He can’t remember Dream. He can’t remember *loving* Dream. George isn’t, can’t, grieve Dream, but only that someone sacrificed for him and suffered for it, only that even knowing the whole story now, he can’t connect with his best friend, can’t help him mourn, can’t support him how he knows Sapnap wishes he would.

And he’s grieving because there is a part of him that is relieved. Relieved that all of this happened. Because without it, he never would have met XD. He never would have loved XD. There would never have been so many long nights where he explored the world by moonlight with XD at his side, there would never have been so many jokes and smiles and shy hand-holding, there would never have been the long conversations about anything George bothered to voice, the sweet memories of watching XD learn the world, the dances they’d snuck into their sneak-aways. He never would have loved XD had he not forgotten Dream and he can’t regret loving XD. He *can’t*, and he hates himself for it.

“I’m sorry.” he sobs, “I’m so sorry.”

“It’s okay.” XD strokes his hair, pulls him closer until their foreheads are touching again, “George, it’s okay.”

“It isn’t.” George clutches his cloak, “It isn’t. I love you.”

“I love you.” XD sighs like a wish, “George, I love you.”

“No, I love *you*, XD.” George shakes his head, “I love *y-you*, not -”

Not Dream. Not a stranger, not the hero in a tale. George loves his ghost.

“Oh.” XD says, and it is bittersweet. Pleased, and devastated.

George cries all the harder, tears falling to XD’s mask and rolling down the pale porcelain like they were his own.

It is a long, long time before the others return. George cries until he can’t anymore, and then he has to chew more roots for his migraine because his head is throbbing so hard he’s close to throwing up. He checks on XD’s wound when XD promises that it is mostly closed, though he is very weak. Weaker than after the first teleport. He was still recovering from *that* use of magic and any healing he’s done in the last weeks has disappeared, leaving him weak and vulnerable. A miraculous occurrence used twice. No longer a miracle, but just as devastatingly hard to do. It’s left him completely drained. XD can barely even sit up, let alone do any sort of magic.

Sapnap doesn’t look at them as he’s led back into their makeshift camp, no torches or tent or beds. Just a small fire that George made, the thin mattresses of their beds laid on the ground by the fire instead of the foldable frames.

Sapnap looks like a wreck. His face is blotchy, eyes red-rimmed, and every so often his chest shudders, a quick *huh-huh-huh* that has Karl rubbing his shoulders. Guilt pools low and deep in his gut, making him feel sick. Quackity follows them out of the woods, holding Nightmare in his hands, face drawn and tight in the firelight.

“Sapnap,” He starts, not quite sure how to start, but Karl shakes his head.

“Not now,” He says when Sapnap doesn’t even look George’s way, “In the morning.”

George nods - his words got stuck in his throat anyway. He watches as Karl leads a stumbling Sapnap to the bedroll by the fire; they’re all far too exhausted to set up a tent right now. Sapnap curls up with his back to George, Karl murmuring to him far too quietly for George to hear. George turns his face away. It’s not for him.

Quackity stands off to the side, rubbing a hand over his face, his pallor pale and a resigned, miserable look in his eyes. He drops Nightmare next to Sapnap without a word. He doesn’t speak to George as he heads for the edge of camp and starts rummaging through Karl’s bag.

George won’t interrupt him, whatever he’s doing. They all need space, right now.

In the morning, they’ll talk. It’s all he can hold onto as he slips into restless, dreamless, sleep.

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

hello hello!!!!

it is sunday and we are back :) not too much going on in this authors note, just wanted to say thank you once again for reading and we hope you're enjoying the ride <3

PLEASE take note of the chapter warnings. The next handful of chapters deal with some heavy stuff and we want you to be safe!! These warnings are not between any tagged ship and keep in mind that this fic is tagged with promised happy ending :)

Chapter cw: Onscreen violence, implied violence/coercion, **graphic descriptions of intimate partner violence and abuse**, grief/mourning

The sun is high in the sky before Sapnap can stand to sit up and face the world again, but he's been awake since before dawn. He feels raw, hollowed out. If he lies with his back to the fire, and to George and XD, then he can pretend that everything is just as it was the day before. If he closes his eyes, he can pretend that he isn't in the hunting woods, a familiar birch grove marked from a decade of their friendly manhunts.

In the end, though, the most basic of human instincts get him up; he's hungry. They couldn't stand to eat much in the Crimson Forest, a combination of heatstroke and the relentless pace, chewing on the dried rabbit as they went to keep their energy up. The thought of food disgusts him but his stomach aches and growls until he gives in.

"Hey," Karl says, the moment he makes any kind of move. He remembers feeling the warm body pressed against his move sometime earlier in the morning, slipping out from his arms and tucking that heavy, comforting cloak around his shoulders, under his chin. "Saved you some soup."

The cloak pools around Sapnap's waist as he sits up. He's alert, but the midday sun is bright, and he blinks blearily to try and see the world he was ignoring.

Karl, handing him a wooden bowl with some hastily scavenged mushrooms floating in a weak broth. Quackity, a pile of ashes at his feet, smoking like the world is about to end with his gaze fixed in the distance. George and XD, leaning against each other. Sapnap can almost see the outline of a body, flesh and blood, from the way that his cloak is falling, gathered to make room for George at his side.

The wound from Technoblade might have healed, but there is still a ragged gash, glaring in the rest of the cloak's obvious perfection.

He can't help but feel like Dream would have hated it. Too flowy, too much fabric, far too unwieldy to fight in. Sapnap has to look away then, to avoid sobbing into his soup. He's only partially successful, from the sympathetic stare he gets from Karl.

"Hey, Sapnap."

Sapnap's head jerks upwards; he hadn't realized George was awake. He doesn't mean to meet George's eyes; full of guilt and apologies that Sapnap can't accept yet. In a panic, he looks to the next nearest target: XD.

The damned mask stares back, and it's all Sapnap can do not to get up and rip it off his face. So instead, he hunches his shoulders over and tries to stomach the soup. It's completely tasteless, and he loses his appetite immediately. He swallows it all anyway. George's stare still pins him in, unable to move, or speak, or do anything until the bowl is done and placed to the side.

He clears his throat, fixes his gaze on a spot above George's head, and says, "Hey."

The silence is deafening. For the first time in his life, he has no idea what to say to his best friend.

"I, um. I pinpointed exactly where we were," Karl says, hesitantly dipping a toe into the tension between them, "No one should know, though, thanks to the teleport, so we won't have to worry about mercs for a while, at least. And I've got another path plotted to the Badlands, if that's still our next move. That is still the plan, right?"

"How did Techno find us?" George asks, voice scratchy.

"Wilbur, or perhaps his brother." XD intones. "I sensed it. They have touched the Nether. One or the other would be able to sense me."

"I don't know what the plan is," Sapnap says, soaking in that information. His head is too empty to properly synthesize it. "I don't know anymore."

"We have to go," George says, decisive, "We're too close to the castle now, it's too dangerous for you."

"Right," Sapnap says, mirthless, "For *me*. Never mind that Schlatt probably wants you dead."

Quackity flinches, out there on the edge of camp. Sapnap looks over sharply, but it's only to see Quackity drop his cigarette, blowing on his fingers. He deliberately refuses to think about what Wilbur said. He doesn't - he can't. He can't think about anything right now.

"He wants the throne and the power that comes with it." XD's voice no longer reverberates as it once did, but it commands silence in the same way, the way Dream's does. Did. "I do not know if he understands what price he must pay for it."

Quackity lights another cigarette. Sapnap hasn't seen him smoke since that first, dizzying teleport from XD - or should he call him Dream? Is it really Dream, under all that pomp and circumstance and bone-white mask?

Because it's Dream and it's *not* Dream. It's his ghost, complete with the sheet and the approaching chill. Sapnap is being haunted by the ghost of the brother he lost to the throne. It's his best friend but he didn't say a single thing to Sapnap in all the months he's been traveling with them. He doesn't know how to fix this. He doesn't know how to pull the parts of Dream that he remembers from this unfathomable figure leaning heavily on their prince. He doesn't know how to put the image of XD; floating, immutable, all-powerful; with the image of Dream; grounded and grinning and fallible.

He doesn't know how to fix this, so Sapnap turns his head and asks, as much for a distraction as anything else, and because he hasn't said a single thing to them yet, and it's concerning, "What do you think, Big Q?"

The wind changes as Quackity exhales out slowly. For a moment, all Sapnap can smell is the familiar scent of tobacco and ash, and an unfamiliar *something* coming from that cigarette. Quackity, all at once, stinks of fear. Cheap liquor.

“I think,” Quackity says, and something unidentifiable in his voice makes Sapnap tilt his head, frowning, on edge, “I think this is it.”

“What do you mean?” Karl asks, from behind him, and something twists in Sapnap’s stomach; the silence before an alarm goes off, the breath before an explosion, a sob before a panic attack starts in full. Something is wrong. It sets Sapnap’s teeth on edge, but he trusts Quackity and resists the urge to rest a hand on the hilt of his sword despite the stench filling the camp. No matter what bullshit Wilbur was spewing, he knows Quackity. Quackity wouldn’t - he wouldn’t.

“Quackity?” He rasps. The silence drags on as Quackity gets up, meandering across the clearing of soft sunlight and green grass towards where George and XD are sitting. If they weren’t on a life or death mission, it might have been a nice space for a picnic. In the distance, a rumble rocks the trees; a flock of birds break, suddenly, from the overgrowth, shrieking their displeasure from being disturbed.

George frowns up at him as he approaches, squinting his eyes against the sun.

“You alright, Quackity?”

Quackity takes a long drag, and the acid and liquor burn in Sapnap’s lungs, curdling in his stomach.

“No,” He says, soft and final, the last handful of dirt shoveled over a grave, “No, I’m not.”

He drops the cigarette. In a split-second, that beautifully woven cloak is ablaze, and XD is shrieking, high and pained and so utterly human that it breaks Sapnap’s heart clean in two. He doesn’t have time to think, to process whatever the fuck Quackity just did, because George is already scrambling at XD’s cloak to try and pull it off, yelping as it burns his hands, but still trying to pull it away regardless. The two of them sink like a stone to the ground, Sapnap there a second later, ripping at the smoldering fabric to try and get it off him as fast as possible. Dream - XD is still screaming. The cloak is still burning. And Quackity stands there, face impassive and head cocked towards the approaching sound of riders, the rumbling from before getting closer and closer with each second.

“Q,” Karl says, face pale and horrified, “Q, no, you *didn’t*-”

And isn’t that an implication that Sapnap can’t even begin to process right now, because the first soldiers are bursting through the trees, hues of black and red painted on their armor, but he knows they’re palace guards even if he doesn’t recognize a single face amongst them.

There’s so many of them, but as XD collapses, whimpering quietly in George’s arms as the cloak finally stops burning due to George’s efforts, XD’s magic too drained to protect it and himself, he knows that he doesn’t have a choice.

Karl has a dagger out, which is some comfort considering that Quackity is still empty-handed and blank-faced, but the soldiers keep coming, surrounding them so tightly Sapnap can’t even see the trees at the edge of the clearing. Sapnap draws Nightmare, and ignores the voice in him that says he won’t win this one.

“Don’t.” Quackity says, flat and emotionless, “Don’t fight.”

George cradles XD in his arms, body lithe and thin under the cloak, clad in loose, dark green clothes and still, the mask; it sends horror into Sapnap's bones. For the first time, XD looks like Dream. Or perhaps it is that, for the first time, Sapnap is recognizing him.

"Quackity, what is this?" He demands, desperate. Just say something, he wants to beg. Just say *I don't know*. Just say *I'm so surprised!* Sapnap doesn't even need it to be convincing. Just enough for him to latch on.

Quackity looks at him, pretty eyes void of any warmth at all, and Sapnap is lost.

"Quackity." Karl begs, "No."

"Someone grab the prince!" He hears ordered and Sapnap doesn't hesitate despite the hurricane of confusion and shock inside of his chest, working its way up his throat and into his head. A guard takes a step toward George, who hunches protectively over XD, and Sapnap cuts him down with a wordless cry of rage, Nightmare singing as it slides through flesh and blood splatters.

The world freezes. Quackity stays stone-faced.

The guards descend all at once, like vultures on a corpse. He takes down another, Nightmare biting through armor with a shriek of splitting iron, and wounds someone else on his shift, but - if Sapnap had more room, he'd have had more of a chance. If it were just him in this circle - but it isn't. It's George, and XD, and Karl and, fuck, even Quackity, all here with him, getting in his way so he can't perform full motions. He hears shouting; it could be Karl, George, or even Quackity. He can't hear them over the rushing blood in his ears. They're depending on him - they're all depending on him to keep them safe, he has to -

But he's only himself; weak, useless, always too slow Sapnap. Someone gets him from behind, kicks his legs out from under him and he goes down with a shout, barely managing to keep a grip on Nightmare. He sees a mace raised up and knows he won't get Nightmare up in time. He doesn't close his eyes. He wants to see the person that takes his life, wants to memorize their face so he can come back and haunt them for the rest of their sad, pathetic life.

"No!" Someone - Dream, it's *Dream* - shouts, "Sapnap!"

There's a flash, a pop, an echo of the blast that brought XD to his line of sight for the first time and the entire order of guards is blown back a full ten feet.

"XD!" George cries out, "XD, no!"

Sapnap twists around on his knees, finds XD holding a gloved hand out weakly, fingers stretched out to Sapnap in desperation, an echo of his reach for George in the fire swamp.

"*Pandas...*" XD grits out, "You're okay...you're okay..."

"I'm okay." Sapnap says with a barely-withheld sob. He drops Nightmare to reach back, attempts to get to Dream and George, but the guards recover quickly and there's nothing Sapnap can do, on his knees, Nightmare at his side but quickly kicked away. Iron presses to his skin, a twisted echo of the night he met Karl and Quackity, except this time it's a guard who won't hesitate to slit his throat. It doesn't matter. He can't take his eyes off XD, can't help but watch the way the desperate hand falls as XD seemingly loses consciousness. Masked, so still, so silent. All things Dream, *his Dream*, should never, ever be.

And yet. *And yet.*

When he finally drags his eyes from XD, it's to see Karl at swordpoint, as well, with his dagger at his feet. The thudding of his heart rings in his ears, loud over George's panicked shouting.

"Stop, don't hurt him, STOP! He's just a librarian, he can't even fight!"

"I really don't think you have the authority to order us around anymore, *your majesty*."

For all that it must have been a mad dash through the woods, a chase that Sapnap didn't even know that they were a part of, Schlatt still looks as put together as he did the last time that Sapnap saw him on the court floor. A pressed black suit, hair slicked back around his curled horns, and yellow slitted eyes for one person and one person alone, sitting on a freshly tamed horse and towering above every person in the clearing.

"Fuck you," George says, pulling the unconscious XD closer into his lap, shaking with fear and anger, "Fuck you, fuck you-"

"Sweetcheeks," Schlatt says, interrupting, and Sapnap's hunter eyes fly to sudden movement. Quackity's shoulders fold inwards, his gaze at the ground. Schlatt continues. "I thought I'd never see you again. You almost had me *worried*."

"Sorry, Schlatt." Quackity says, his wings tucked in tight to his back, "Harder than I thought."

"Quackity?" Sapnap says, and hates how his voice wavers, Adam's apple bobbing against the tip of the blade at his throat. On the other side of their enclosed circle, Karl is pale and horrified, unable to take his eyes off Quackity either.

It isn't grief eating away at what is left of his heart, Sapnap realizes. Not anymore. There is only betrayal, pulling the foundations of what had once been an unshakeable drive to prove that, while Sapnap was not Dream, he was going to get himself and George through this. His chest aches. Something is crumbling, shattering and he thinks it's the last of whatever thin emotions were still keeping him going.

"Move." Schlatt says and the guards move for him, clearing a way straight to Quackity.

Schlatt slips off his horse and walks casually through his mercs to the center, where he throws his arms around Quackity's shoulders. Quackity, somehow, looks even smaller than usual.

"The whole way here, I was thinkin'; he better have something for me, for calling me all the way out here, makin' me use up all my speed pots and ender pearls for all of us to get here in time. I never should have doubted you, birdy! Here you are, prince at the ready!"

His hand comes up, and he runs fond and twisting fingers through Quackity's hair, with no regard for his ever-present beanie. It sends a shiver up Sapnap spine, a shiver of pure revulsion. Quackity doesn't move or look at Schlatt, just stares at the ground.

"Honeybunch, when I stopped getting your letters..." His hand shifts, letting the beanie fall to the floor and leaving his hair ruffled. He steps on it with one perfectly polished shoe. "I was afraid you'd never be comin' home again. That you'd gotten hurt or, worse, become *attached*. But you're house-trained, after all! Good boy. I hoped *that* lesson would stick."

He fidgets with Quackity's person as he talks; pinching Quackity's cheek, grabbing his face with reaching fingers and pulling it towards him to squeeze his cheeks together. He plucks at Quackity's hair, so casual and unconcerned, even as Quackity is so still, so silent, not looking at any one of them or even Schlatt. Just the ground.

Sapnap's voice doesn't seem to work, and his mind is screaming; a cacophonous mix of *fuck this fuck this fuck him* and *don't you dare touch him don't you dare -*

A moment later, Sapnap realizes that the last part wasn't in his mind. Karl was shouting, louder and angrier than Sapnap's ever heard him.

"Don't fucking touch him, Schlatt, get your fucking hands off him right now!"

For a moment, Sapnap is terrified that Karl will move forward, push against the swords that are keeping him in place. He's practically vibrating on his feet, his hands scrunched up into fists and his face bright red. Sapnap has never seen Karl angry, not like this. Then Schlatt speaks, and all that terror curdles like sour milk.

"Now *here's* someone who *does* need to learn a lesson. After such an expensive pet-sitting fee, I expected more from you, Mr. Jacobs."

No.

There's a blistering, terrible moment as heat builds behind Sapnap's eyes, and he just stares at Karl, waiting for him to...refute Schlatt or call him a liar, or *something*. It doesn't have to be believable. Sapnap wants Karl to fucking lie if he has to, just say it isn't true. Just give Sapnap something to cling to.

Instead, Karl inhales, sharp, before he glances at Sapnap. It's only a moment, but Sapnap cannot deny the guilt that lies there, plain as day, before Karl's attention snaps back to Schlatt.

"Fuck you!" He yells, so loud his voice cracks, "The moment I realized what a piece of shit you were, I was out of that deal. I owe you *nothing*." Karl, vicious and feral, spits in Schlatt's direction. It doesn't hit him, of course, but Schlatt's eyebrow lifts and his fingers twitch in Quackity's hair. The shorter man can't hide a wince.

"Pshh, details, details," Schlatt waves his free hand in the air and he turns on his heels to face George, "Right now, it's not important. What's important is you, your royal highness. All this trouble for someone who, in the end, went down so easy."

Schlatt steps forward, Quackity pulled with him by the hand in his hair, and stops to loom over George. George, who is still holding XD, smoothing out his singed hair even as the other now lies limp, chest rising and falling in his unconsciousness, looks up at him with utter contempt. Sapnap sees the queen as if on an overlay. That look is all his mother.

Schlatt doesn't stop smiling, "And you even found him, your little left-behind! All of this trouble for you, little prince. All of the power that could be at your fingertips, is *literally* at your fingertips, and you don't even want it. Don't know how to use it. What a *waste*. Ah, well. Best to get it out of the way sooner rather than later."

He gestures at a guard, who steps forward, and Sapnap's heart drops out of his chest.

"No," He says, "No, stop, no, *George!*"

"One more word out of you, and I'll slit your throat myself," Schlatt says lightly as he takes the sword offered to him from the guard. He lets go of Quackity to hold the sword in both hands and give it a test swing much too close to George for Sapnap's comfort. George ducks with a yelp, hugging XD tighter.

"Fuck you!" Sapnap explodes, "Fuck you! Kill me, I don't fucking care, but don't you dare hurt

him, you fucking coward!"

"Sapnap," Karl says, straining against the guards who have grabbed his arms, "Stop!"

A slice of pain. Blood drips down his front as the sword digs into his throat. It turns from a drip into a rivulet as he presses forward, desperation in every motion as he watches Schlatt examine the sword with a clinical precision. If he speaks again, they'll kill him, and he can't protect George. But he can't move, can't do anything even as Schlatt raises the sword, ready to strike.

"Not now, Schlatt." Quackity says suddenly, finally speaking up. He places a hand on Schlatt's arm and doesn't wince at the poisonous glare that Schlatt shoots at him. "Listen, we ran into Wilbur. They want the prince, too; him and his little fucking gang. Phil's been feeding them information, he's sent T-Technoblade after us. How better to undermine them, all of them, than if you make sure they've got nothing left to fight for? No claim at all?"

"That's what I'm doing, sweetcheeks," Schlatt says, with a long-suffering sigh, "Come on, do I really need to explain this to you again? You know how I hate repeatin' myself."

"Make it public. Back at the capital, right in front of the castle. Then no one can fucking question you ever again. Wilbur can't say they killed him and you stole his body, Technoblade can't say you have no claim to the throne, Phil can't bargain clemency until the prince is back. Why make it an execution in the woods with just us? End the monarchy in the public eye, where the peasantry can celebrate the end of all this tyranny!"

"No -!" Sapnap shouts, then coughs, cut off as the blade digs a little deeper. It's close to his artery. A single wrong move would kill him.

"Quackity," Karl says, heartbroken as he tries and fails to catch Quackity's eye, "Q, come on, this isn't - this isn't you, you said that you were *done*. That you didn't want this shit anymore -"

"Oh, did he? Did my birdy forget he was *mine*?" Schlatt says, voice curling around the word, "I'm sure whatever you said was just a ruse."

Quackity, whose face has somehow got even paler, says, "Of course, Schlatt."

"That's why you didn't write a single thing to me after you went and disappeared on my guards, isn't it? Earning their trust?"

"...Yes." Quackity says, in barely a whisper. It sounds like a lie. Sapnap hopes, in spite of his crumbling heart, that it is.

Schlatt sighs, big and loud like he's been asked to walk to the moon and back, "Yeah, okay, I'll let you keep them until we get back to the castle. You can say your goodbyes on the trip, huh? That'll be fun! Just don't get too friendly. Mission's over, honeybunch. Time to come home." He pats Quackity's cheek with an audible *smack* against his skin.

"Maybe if you're good, you can keep a few of 'em proper, huh?" Schlatt continues, "I only need the annoying brat dead."

"I'll kill you if you hurt him, *I'll kill you* -"

Pain explodes in the back of Sapnap's head, and he crumples to the ground. The blade is pulled away from his throat, a small positive even as the world spins around him. Someone pins him down with a knee to his spine.

"Of course," Schlatt purrs, hand on the back of Quackity's neck, "If you can't get them to behave, then you might just have to learn to share until they're house-trained."

Quackity flinches away, sounding like Quackity for the first time. "Don't touch them."

Schlatt raises an eyebrow, "Oh? I thought you didn't care?"

Quackity backtracks instantly, but even to Sapnap, maybe-concussed and dizzy, it sounds fake, "I don't."

"Then why are they worth you back talkin', huh?"

"I didn't -"

"Don't forget," Schlatt says, voice low, anger prowling at the edges of his speech, "I know you better than they do. I know *exactly* who you are. Do they know you're a traitor? A liar? You really think I believe you didn't ponder leaving me behind, Quackity? You really think I believed you? And even knowin' all that, I'm still here. Anyone else would have run for the hills by now. You think *they* wouldn't, especially now?" He laughs. "Fuck, you're kinda pathetic. Two months is all it took?"

"That's not true," Karl says, still spitting and snarling like a feral cat in his anger, "Quackity, you know that isn't true, you're more than that, you're *better* than him."

Once again, Schlatt waves his hand towards Karl like he is a particularly troublesome bug, "Even if you didn't check in, you still delivered the goods, Jacobs. You kept me up to date on my buttercup here while he was away, for a while. Come along, stop your whining and I'll pay you at the capital."

"I don't want your fucking money! I want you to *get away* from him." Karl snaps.

"Is that any way to speak to your employer? At least Q knows his place," Schlatt twists a finger around a strand of Quackity's hair, and then drops his hand; down, down, down, right onto Quackity's wings. Quackity freezes. Schlatt's smile only grows as his fingers now tangle and tug at the feathers that, mere days ago, Sapnap had so carefully set right. Almost immediately, one falls out and flutters to the forest floor. "Don't you, birdy?"

"Yes, sir."

Sapnap wants to throw up. Anger boils, anger at and *for* Quackity, thinking of glazed eyes and whispered horrors and Karl weeping silently over Quackity's bound and broken wings. He's so dizzy he can't move, as much as he wants to bury his fist in Schlatt's face.

Karl has no such issue. He throws himself forward, moving too suddenly for even the guards holding him to stop him, screeching like a demon, "Don't fucking touch him!"

He's on top of Schlatt before anyone can even blink, ramming him away from Quackity with a battle cry; arms pinwheeling and hands tucked into claws as he goes for Schlatt's eyes, scratching and biting and kicking like a wild thing.

It's an attack purely based on rage and, while Karl certainly has the anger for it, he doesn't have the manpower to keep it up. Schlatt's fist collides with his face once he gets his bearings back but Karl keeps going, a little more clumsy and dazed. Quackity rushing forward to pull Karl back but two guards get there first. They haul Karl, kicking and screaming, from Schlatt and throw him to the ground. The first one kicks him in the ribs; the second comes down on his leg. It's not hard

enough to hear a crack, not yet, but the third one's kick is to his head and it immediately makes Karl go limp. There's a fourth. Then a fifth.

There's a lot of yelling; George, Sapnap, who struggles against the pin keeping him down, Schlatt as he swears and nurses the wounds that Karl gave him. But none of that compares to Quackity, screaming over all of them, "Stop, *Schlatt*, stop them! They'll kill him, *please!*"

Sapnap barely hears the moment it turns from screams into sobs, Quackity clutching at Schlatt's arm, begging openly without shame, "Make them stop, it's my fault!! You're going to kill him, *please*, Schlatt, you said you wouldn't hurt them!! I'll - I'm sorry, I'm sorry, that was my fault, punish me, it's my fault, just make them *stop!*"

To Sapnap's relief, Schlatt holds up a hand. The guards stop. For a second, all is silent as Sapnap waits, terrified, to see if Karl is even still alive. Then Karl shifts, breath shuddering through a split lip, coughing out bloodied spit on the ground.

"He needs to learn his lesson, honeybunch." Schlatt says, wiping the blood from his face off with a handkerchief he pulled from a pocket. Karl has left scratches all over his eyes and nose. "You know he does, we can't have him trying to attack us all the way back home, hm?"

"I know, I know, he won't do it again. He's learned, I promise - just - just - just - just tie him up or something, please, he's not going to do anything -" Quackity shoots a frantic glance at Karl, bloody and beaten on the ground, lips split, and Sapnap can read the expression on his face. Pure desperation, begging Karl to just please, please stay down.

"And what will you give me in return, sweetheart? I'm being so kind, doing you a favor by not outright killing him. What do I get out of keeping your little friend alive?"

"...Anything." Quackity says, after a long moment, his eyes still on Karl's wheezing form.

"Anything, huh?"

There's a pause, silence hanging in the air like a condemned man, broken only by Karl shuddering through bruised ribs. Then, there is a crack that sends Quackity reeling back to the ground, dropped by the force with which Schlatt hit him.

Sapnap suddenly realizes where Quackity's reflexes came from when it came to defending himself. He's lost practice. On the ground, Karl chokes out a broken, "*Quackity.*"

"You know I hate to do this to you, buttercup. But that should be incentive enough to keep them nice and good for me," Schlatt kneels at Quackity's side, brushes a thumb over Quackity's face, right over the rapidly blooming mark of his hand. Quackity barely restrains a flinch. "After all, you're mine. You're good for me. Right?"

Quackity nods, eyes on the ground, "I'm good. I'll be good. They'll be good. Everyone will be good, Schlatt, I promise."

"I know, Q, I know you will. You just needed a little help remembering, right? It's been a long time, I doubt these idiots kept you in line," Schlatt speaks as if to a particularly misbehaved pet, slow and condescending, even as he strokes the line of Quackity's cheek, "You're like a little dog that's been off-leash for too long, huh? Just need to remember your training. Don't worry, birdy, I'm here now. We'll make sure you're back in your place, no problem."

"Yes sir," Quackity says, and Schlatt smiles. Sapnap has a visceral reaction to that title, *sir*. He feels cold and sick, his stomach spasming.

“Good boy. Now!” He claps his hands, straightening up to speak en masse, “Start cutting down trees. We’ll need something to keep his royal highness nice and comfortable as we ride back, and to keep his vicious knight on a leash. Someone better have brought those fuckin’ bars or so *help* me! And tie that up,” He adds, nodding towards Karl, “He can run behind us. Let off that destructive energy of his.”

Schlatt motions his guards away from Karl the moment his arms are bound, and Sapnap wants to go to him. Despite it all, he wants to go to them both. His blood is rushing in his ears so loud it’s almost deafening. He has to watch as Schlatt pats Quackity’s bruising cheek, the sound sharp enough to echo, and then help him up, face kind and voice fond. Every part of Sapnap wants to bury Nightmare in his back and watch him bleed out, make him beg for mercy just so Sapnap can say no.

“It’s alright, Q,” Schlatt says, reaching down to run his fingers through Quackity’s feathers one last time, “I’m here now. Now come along, you owe me *something* and I’ve got plenty of time to think about it.”

Quackity shudders and closes his eyes.

“I know, Schlatt,” he says and it sounds like defeat.

It takes the rest of the day for the guards to get everything set up the way Schlatt wants it. He has them fashion a makeshift cage in a wagon using wheels and bars they’d carried on their fast-travel journey. Sapnap and George’s wrists have been roughly bound, thrown together against a tree. XD is also tied up, though he hasn’t moved or said a word since he threw the guards back to save Sapnap. George rubs his wrists to the point of bleeding trying to get to him and only stops when Sapnap reminds him that he’s only bringing attention to XD’s vulnerability.

Finally, as the sun edges down over the break of the trees, Sapnap and George are forced into the makeshift cage, XD thrown between them.

Once they’re thrown together, Sapnap helps George drag XD into George’s lap, head resting on his chest and legs stretched out so he can rest. Sapnap grabs tight to his limp hand, breathing out at the familiarity of the fingers in his grip. George just keeps staring, eyes fixed on the mask. He doesn’t respond to Sapnap’s attempts at checking on him so Sapnap just holds XD’s hand and tries to focus on them, rather than the stewing pit of worry that threatens to overwhelm him every time he looks over at Karl, still lying on the ground against the tree they’d tied him to separate from Sapnap and George.

Eventually, once the dark has truly settled, they drag Karl over as well. His pupils are unfocused in the torchlight.

“Karl?” Sapnap breathes quietly. “You alive?”

“Mhm.” Karl clears his throat, sits up slowly and rubs his head as best he can. “Concussed.”

“No shit. That was fucking stupid, what you did.”

“You saw what he was doing.” Karl hisses in pain as he touches his head and. Yeah. Sapnap saw. If he’d been able to get free, he would have done the same thing Karl did, no matter how betrayed he was. He doesn’t say anything in response.

Time passes and Sapnap doesn’t speak to Karl again, except to ask him the occasional “You alive?” every time he starts to list.

When Quackity finally appears again, a bruise has settled onto his cheek and his color is still off. His eyes are puffy, his hair a mess. He looks as miserable as Sapnap feels.

Part of Sapnap hates that. The rest of him feels viciously good. He doesn't know which part of himself he hates more. He wants to pull Quackity to him, hold him close. He wants to shove him away and spit and snarl until he goes *away*, forever. It's how he feels about Karl, too, the *need* to make sure he's okay versus the need to beat the fuck out of him *himself* for what he's done. What's he's been doing the whole time. Every laugh, every whisper, every kind touch - all to get Sapnap and George here.

Sapnap was used. A tool. He hadn't meant anything to either of them, this whole time.

Through the iron bars (iron, real iron, that they brought specifically to keep Sapnap locked up. He isn't sure if he should feel proud about that or not, that he was threat enough he needed to be caged), he sees Quackity kneel by Karl with a plate and a bowl of steaming water.

They're close enough that Sapnap could reach out and touch them.

He doesn't let go of XD.

"Are you okay?" Karl says quietly, words a little slurred, "Quackity, are you okay?"

"Shut the fuck up," Quackity snaps harshly, pulling a cloth from the bowl and ringing it out aggressively, "Don't - don't ever, ever do that again. Don't fucking touch him. Do you hear me? I don't care what he does to me, don't fucking touch Schlatt. Are you listening?"

"Just tell me you're okay -" Karl says, starting to sound panicky.

"I'm *fine*. For fuck's sake, Karl, you could have lost a fuckin' tooth! Focus on you, what the *fuck* -"

"I don't care." Karl catches Quackity's hand when he tries to bring the cloth to his face to wipe at the blood dried there, "I don't care. I don't know why you had to do this, but we can fix it. We'll fix it. Okay? We'll figure -"

"Karl." Quackity covers his mouth, "Stop."

Karl goes quiet. Sapnap stops breathing.

"We can't fix this." Quackity says, firm and blank, and Sapnap sees the heartbreak on Karl's face and feels the last flitterings of hope die out in one icy swoop.

"He'll fucking kill you next time, Karl, do you understand?" Quackity says, low, serious. "He won't kill me, no matter what he does, he won't kill me. But he doesn't give a single flying *fuck* about you, Karl. You go for him like that again, and you're fucking dead. Get back to the capital, take his fucking money, and get the hell out."

"But," Karl's gaze flickers between Quackity and Sapnap, and then George, still staring at XD. Sapnap is pretty sure he's in shock, much like Sapnap is sure he is. "They're our friends, Q, that's *Sapnap*, Quackity, you said -"

"Stop," Quackity says again, almost begging. "Just stop. It's too late."

Karl's face crumples, and he reaches out his hands towards Quackity, as bound as they are. Quackity takes the chance to wipe at his face, clean his eyes out, at the very least. "Why? Q, baby, just...*why*? I thought we agreed to stay."

Quackity is silent for a long moment. The redness is still stark against his skin, the shape of a handprint obvious. It's going to swell if he doesn't put ice on it, Sapnap thinks, vaguely, then viciously reminds himself he shouldn't care anymore. Quackity doesn't take Karl's outstretched hands.

"... He's what I deserve," Quackity says, a dead man echoing from his own grave, and stands up. He leaves the bowl of water and the plate of food. "Share that."

And then he slips away from them. Sapnap doesn't watch him leave.

The guards sleep during the night, but there are always at least three on watch. One stares unblinkingly at the four of them, another walks the perimeter, yet another sits outside Schlatt's tent, the only tent erected, where Schlatt and Quackity disappeared soon after Quackity dropped food off to them.

Karl nods off to sleep at one point, the pain no doubt lulling him to get some rest. George begins to breathe deeply soon after, curled protectively over XD even in sleep. XD still hasn't shifted, but he's breathing evenly and Sapnap just has to assume he's...resting. Healing.

Sapnap doesn't sleep. He sits in the same spot, unmoving. If he uses the breathing methods Quackity taught him when he begins to feel overwhelmed by the grief and panic, if he closes his eyes and puts his face to the bars and pretends the chilly metal is a pair of soft, cold hands on his cheeks, focusing him, he will never say it to anyone living or dead.

When first light breaks, the camp awakens with a well-organized whisper. Supplies are packed away, including their ransacked enderchest. Quackity is out of the tent before the morning horn is blown. The bruise has darkened on his cheek, leaving both sides of his face marked with violence. He's wearing new clothes, slacks and suspenders and a loose, blue tie, scuffed leather armor nowhere in sight, his beanie back in place and his wings hidden once more. He walks with authority. People go to him for answers and he directs the camp from the other side of the clearing to them, refuses to even glance their way. He looks like a stranger. He holds himself like a stranger. There isn't a smile in sight, just a grim man with a scar and a bruise.

Sapnap locks down the feelings trying to well up. He can't. He can't deal with those right now. He holds XD's hand tighter.

Just as it looks like everything is ready to go, Schlatt emerges from his tent. Sapnap watches him call Quackity over, who walks to his side with the air of someone going to their grave. Schlatt points at them with his thumb and Quackity nods once, eyes back on the ground, and disappears into the group of guards. There's probably fifteen of them, plus the ones Sapnap hopefully killed, or at least brutally injured, yesterday. If only Sapnap had Nightmare - but he doesn't know where his sword is. Probably packed away with the rest of their things, to be handed out as needed in a fight. Or maybe to be used as their execution weapon, for Schlatt to lord over them.

Quackity reappears with another plate of food.

He approaches the cage as slowly as he'd approached Schlatt, with a similar aura.

Sapnap doesn't realize Karl is awake until Quackity carefully picks up the untouched plate from last night and puts the new one down.

"Are you okay?" Karl asks, the same as yesterday.

"I'm fine." Quackity says shortly. "Eat. You're going to need your strength. He won't keep the

pace slow for you, you're going to need to keep up.”

“For fuck’s sake, Quackity,” Sapnap bites out, “He’s got a freaking concussion. You’ll be lucky if he can take a few steps before he’s throwing up everywhere and getting dragged.”

Quackity doesn’t flinch, or look his way.

“I’ll see what I can do.” Quackity stands up and turns to leave but pauses only a step away. “Don’t fight him. Just...be quiet. Stay down, all of you.”

“Fuck you.” Sapnap sneers and that does make Quackity flinch. He nods, once, and trots away.

“Sapnap...” Karl starts, but he sounds out of it, “Please, he’s just...”

“*Don’t.*” Sapnap says with force and Karl goes quiet.

Karl doesn’t eat, but he passes the food up to Sapnap, who stares down at the four rations. Quackity gave them an extra.

Sapnap manages half of one before his stomach flips and he nearly throws it up. He forces the feeling down. He can’t...He can’t.

He sets the plate aside, hoping that George will eat when he wakes.

The camp is broken down within half an hour of the sun fully rising.

“We’re heading home, all!” Schlatt calls from the front of the party and the order all lift their swords in the air and cheer. Sapnap tries desperately to keep what little food he’d swallowed down at the thought of returning back to that castle. He holds Dream’s hand tighter, lifts it up and presses the gloved fingers to his forehead. He tries to breathe through the panic, but his lungs are getting tighter and tighter. He shoves it down. He can’t.

He can’t. Not right now.

“Karl.” Quackity’s voice snaps Sapnap’s eyes open. Quackity is standing close again, looking down at Karl with empty eyes. “You’re going to sit on the cart until I’m sure you’re not going to trip and drag.”

“Hm?” Karl hums, shaking his head, “I’m awake.”

“Fuck.” Quackity drops to his knees, actually sounding worried. “Karl, look at me.”

Sapnap squirms closer, trying to get a look. He hasn’t checked in on Karl since he was given the food. Fuck. Fuck, is he okay?

“There we go. Follow my finger.” Quackity says quietly and Sapnap can’t see Karl but he can see Quackity holding up one finger and carefully drifting it left and right, “Good. Good. Look up at the sky for me. Good. Come on, up.”

Karl appears as Quackity pulls at him until he’s standing on shaky legs. There’s not much room between the end of the cage and the wagon, but Quackity pushes at Karl until he’s sitting in the space, his bean-pole build finally coming in handy. Quackity leans over, close to the cage, and knots Karl’s hands to the bars.

“If the ride gets bumpy,” Quackity lowers his voice, “You’ll have to grab him so he doesn’t fall. He’s not in danger, but I’ll bet his head is fuckin’ killing him. He won’t be able to focus on holding

on for long. I - I know you're mad, Sapnap, you've every right to be angry, but Karl didn't -"

"Don't you dare." Sapnap stares at him, "Don't you fucking dare treat me like I'm anything like Schlatt. I won't let Karl get *dragged to death*. Don't you dare act like you have to beg me to have common decency, Quackity."

"I didn't mean -" Quackity flinches back, nearly falling off the wagon before he catches himself in his haste, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean -"

"Whatever." Sapnap slithers an arm out of the bars, gets a solid grip on the side of the wagon around Karl so he stays locked in the space between the wall and Sapnap's arm.

Quackity doesn't speak again. He checks on Karl, slips a waterskin into Sapnap's lap through the bars, and disappears to Schlatt's side.

Sapnap doesn't watch him go, doesn't think he'll ever be able to watch Quackity walk away. He thinks that if he did, he might finally shatter into a million pieces right there in the cage. Every time he thinks he's finally reached his breaking point, he finds that there's always just a little bit more of him left to hurt.

"Fancy seeing you here."

It's the first time Karl's spoken all day, hours into the ride. The sun beats down hot and heavy on them, but nowhere near as oppressive as the Crimson Forest did. This heat empowers Sapnap, fills him with energy he can do nothing with except use to repress all the thoughts trying to cloud his head.

Karl sounds awake, at least, and his hands hold tight to the bars as their wagon drags over the main footpath of the area. They're going at a quick pace, many of the walking guards nearly jogging. A number of them have tucked their armor away in enderchests, while others have horses that are being kept at a steady pace ahead.

Schlatt and Quackity are up there, Sapnap knows, because he's been unable to stop looking at his (former?) friend the entire day. He's been caught in a miserable pattern of checking in on each of them, Karl's face swollen with bruises and George practically catatonic, XD's smudged mask and Quackity's averted eyes.

"Don't push it." Sapnap says lowly. "I'm only doing this so you don't die, Karl."

"I appreciate it." Karl shifts, winces, "I know I don't deserve it."

"Shut up." Sapnap glances around, but the only guard close by is the one with a horse hitched to the wagon. The loud rumble of hoofbeats and steps will hopefully drown out whatever conversation Karl wants to have here. Sapnap wishes he wouldn't try to have any conversation at all, but Sapnap has *finally* learned that his wishes aren't for granting.

"I will." Karl says, but Sapnap knows it's a lie. Karl hasn't shut up since they met. "I just...I wanted to explain. Contextualize. I know you're hurt."

"You don't know anything."

"That's fair." Karl nods, serious. "I don't. If anyone is the bad guy here, it's me, okay? It's me. I'll admit that. I have no idea what you're going through right now."

“Then I think you should be quiet.” Sapnap cuts a look at him but has to look away immediately. He’s never had a tolerance for Karl’s eyes. They’re dark right now, nearly green, somehow brighter against the dark bruises around them.

“Can I explain?” Karl asks softly, “Then I’ll be quiet the rest of the ride, if you want. I promise.”

“Your promises don’t mean shit to me, Karl!” Sapnap snaps at him, “Don’t fucking promise me anything. I just found out you’ve been *spying on us* since the moment we met!”

“Bad word choice.” Karl nods seriously, “Yeah, I get that. Okay. I won’t promise, then, but I’ll show you. I won’t talk to you again, after this, if that’s what you want. You say the word, and I’ll do it.”

Sapnap’s eyes burn and he has to blink hard. “I’ve heard that before.”

“I meant it then, too.” Karl tries to move his hands and frowns when he can’t. “Damn it, this freakin’ rope. I just want to hold your hand.”

Sapnap doesn’t want to admit that he wants Karl to hold his hand. He wants Karl to say *this is all a misunderstanding. We didn’t betray you, Sapnap. This is some sort of awful, terrible joke and the next time Quackity comes back we’re going to say ‘haha, fooled you!’ and everything will go back to how it was.*

That isn’t what Karl is going to say, though, and Sapnap knows that. He knows that whatever Karl says, it won’t fix this. Quackity was right, it’s not fixable.

“Can I explain, Sapnap?” Karl ducks his head to catch Sapnap’s eyes and Sapnap, like always, is caught.

“Will you stop if I say no?” Sapnap asks, more curious than bitter and Karl looks pained but he nods.

“The ball’s in your court, Sap.” Karl exhales. “You don’t have to listen to me. Nothing I’m about to say will absolve me. Or Quackity, even. It’s not an excuse. Just what brought us here.”

“Why couldn’t you have told me this around a fire?” Sapnap demands, voice breaking, “W-why did it come to this? Why did you *do this*, Karl?”

“Because I’m an idiot.” Karl says immediately, “Because I’m a coward. Billiam was right about me. He was a fool, but he wasn’t wrong about *me*. About what kind of person I am. I’ve never stuck around anywhere, not for long. Not even my guild. I took this job and left them behind for all this time and just sent a few letters so they knew I wasn’t dead. I *am* a cad. I’m also a fraud. I’ve only ever been loyal to my guild and, even then, I don’t know if they’d trust their lives with me, either. I’m not good, Sap, I’ll admit it. But, when I was with you guys...I wanted to be.”

Sapnap lets his head thunk against the bars between them, ignores how fucking badly it hurts to do so. Maybe Karl isn’t the only one concussed. His arm is nearly dead from how long he’s been holding it in the same position so Karl doesn’t fall off the back. He takes a second to flex, let the blood flow, settle in that pain as a way to stay in the moment.

“Fine.” he grits out. “Fine. Explain away.”

“I wanted to tell you...so many times.” Karl starts out. “I did. I knew since the cave that you, that *both* of you, were different. That I wouldn’t be able to just walk away. When you went out in the rain and my body just...acted. I didn’t think, I just - chased you. Me! I’ve never done something

like that in my life. I don't...I never cared, before, like that. I didn't think it was possible for me to care like that."

Sapnap ducks his face, presses his hot skin to the bars. It doesn't help. They're starting to heat up in the sun, might get too hot for George or Karl to comfortably touch in the next few hours.

"It was dangerous."

"It was! But I didn't even...I just...saw you leave, and knew you were in trouble, so I went. That was the first time. I wanted to come clean right then, to both of you. But I got scared. You were already upset and...and I thought, you know, I'd only sent a couple letters. Just keeping Schlatt updated. He just wanted to know if Quackity was doing his job, that's all. I was just supposed to keep watch over Q, make sure he wasn't getting any thoughts about running away. I thought that was weird, when I got hired, but it didn't matter to me what I was doing. I was just bored and looking for some extra cash and a friend of mine contacted me about taking an easy job for Schlatt, so I took it. Stopping my letters to Schlatt wasn't a difficult decision. It would be just like with Billiam. I'd disappear for a while and then show back up when the heat died down."

"Because that worked out real well with Billiam." Sapnap frowns, glancing up. Karl's watching him, eyes sad.

"Yeah." Karl agrees, "It was stupid. I was just trying to justify not telling you. I knew once I did, you'd probably hate me and I...I really didn't want you to hate me."

Sapnap wants to say *I hate you now*. He wants to, but he knows it isn't true.

"Either way, I knew, then." Karl continues. "But I didn't say anything. And then XD showed up and we were out in the middle of nowhere and I just...convinced myself that if I wasn't sending letters anymore, then it didn't really matter. Schlatt was across the country. I had you and Quackity with me, Quackity was safe -"

"You *knew?*" Sapnap does look up then, eyes wide, "Did you know that he - ?"

That Schlatt treated Quackity the way he's been treating him since Schlatt found them. Like Quackity was a toy to be played with, a pet to be trained and ordered around.

"I didn't." Karl says firmly, "No, I swear, I didn't, not when I first met him."

Against the odds, Sapnap's hackles lower. He believes him.

"My job was to just make sure he wasn't betraying Schlatt. But then...every time he got hurt, he'd..." Sapnap nodded carefully and Karl moved on, "I didn't know. But I started to suspect...and then that night, when Billiam cut his wing and he - he was begging you to stop hurting him,"

Sapnap remembers. It still brings a curl of disgust and anger, that he'd had to open old wounds in his quest to sew up new ones.

"And I...made the connection. Some things fell into place, it made *sense*. That was when I knew I couldn't let Quackity go back. No matter what. I wanted to stay with you, and I wanted him to stay, too. He...he was scared. He was fucking terrified. Every time I brought it up, he'd shut down."

"The fights." Sapnap feels it click, "You were fighting about it."

"*I was fighting about it.*" Karl corrects, "Q wouldn't hear a word. He hadn't sent any updates, either, not since before the caves, but...he was so scared to even talk about it. About running away

from Schlatt. The day you and George and XD left us in the camp, we finally talked it out. I told him I wasn't going back without you, that I wanted to stay. That I was going to tell you the truth when we got into the Badlands and beg you to give me a chance to make it up to you."

Sapnap has to look away. He was going to ask them to stay. He was going to ask them to stay with him, stay with him and George and XD. Travel to his family's holiday home where they might be safe for a while.

And Karl had planned to sit him down and tell him that he'd been traveling with spies for weeks and weeks. That they'd informed on him just nights before they'd held him while he burned their palms. That every time Karl pulled him into bed, curled up on top of him and slept, and every time Quackity talked him off a ledge and let Sapnap close, they were working for Schlatt. Schlatt, who wanted Sapnap and his best friends dead so he could take the throne for himself.

"He said to give him time." Karl continues, unaware of Sapnap's internal conflict. "To think. So I did, and he must have thought about it because he...he asked us, in the Crimson Forest. To help him."

"With his wings."

"With his wings." Karl nods, "And he wouldn't have done that if he hadn't made his decision."

"Maybe he did."

"No." Karl shakes his head, "No. I know he wanted to stay. I *know* it, Sapnap. I just...I don't know what changed...what made him do this. We were so close." Karl bows his head, "We were so close."

"Maybe you didn't know him as well as you thought you did." Sapnap sighs. He feels - empty. Karl was right. None of this was an excuse. Just an explanation. It hurt to hear, but it answered some questions, too.

Nothing was fixed.

"I know him." Karl says back with feeling. "I do. I know him. Just like I know you."

"You don't know anything."

"I know enough." Karl bites his lip and breathes out carefully. "I know that I love you, Sapnap. I know that I love Quackity. I know that whatever's about to happen, that won't change for me."

The world stops, drops, rolls into a tight ball in the pit of Sapnap's stomach. It holds its breath, waiting for his response.

"Please don't say that." Sapnap manages to say but he can't stop the heartbreak from coating his voice, "Don't say that to me."

"Sapnap -"

"Don't say that to me, when we're here. When Quackity is standing at the side of the man who's going to kill my best friend and the two of you have been lying to me for so long. *Using* me."

"Sapnap, no -"

"Keep your promise, Karl." Sapnap cuts in. "I heard you. Now keep your promise."

He watches Karl's eyes grow wet, watches him blink rapidly, face pained. Sapnap fights for control of his own emotions, refuses to let the twisted mess of anger and grief and utter heartbreak show on his face even if he can't keep it out of his voice.

"Okay, Sapnap." Karl breathes. "Okay."

Karl doesn't speak again for the rest of the day.

On the second day, Quackity is *tossed* out of the tent in the morning and he comes to the wagon and wordlessly unties Karl's hands from the bars so he can re-tie them to the back of the wagon.

Karl walks that day, and every time he trips, Sapnap feels his breath escape his chest in huffs of alarm.

George still won't look up from XD, or eat. He barely drinks the water Sapnap forces into his mouth. The waterskin is nearly empty.

By the third day, Sapnap has gone through each stage of grief and has ascended into the coveted sixth; boredom. He considers an escape plan for a total of three hours, working through guard rotations, the thickness of the iron bars and the wooden supports, and how fast he could run with XD on his back.

He doesn't want to admit it's hopeless, but when he looks at Karl, exhausted from the relentless pace of the horses, XD, still unconscious, and George, still unresponsive, he knows there is no way he can leave any of them behind.

When he starts heckling, there's a vague plan in his mind about psychological warfare, about trying to lure Schlatt in close, but mostly it's because he's bored and his legs ache. They can't kill him, at least not yet, and if he's going to be stuck miserably in a cage, then everyone who put him there should be miserable too.

"Oi, fuckface!" He makes sure his voice carries, "Hey! You cowardly fucker, at least have the decency to keep us entertained while you lock us in a fucking cage! Too scared to have us out amongst you, huh?"

He doesn't meet Quackity's eyes when the other looks at him, a mix of panic and fear in a face normally so deliberately clear from any kind of emotion. Drag him out, beat him - he doesn't fucking care. He keeps his eyes on Schlatt's back instead, watching how his shoulders stiffen.

Good.

"Hey, goatfucker!" Sapnap shouts and the procession noticeably slows, several of the guards faltering in their shock. He can feel their eyes glancing between him and Schlatt, waiting for a reaction. Quackity's eyes widen, "What's it like to be so fuckin' weak that you have to torment unarmed prisoners to get some sort of power kick? Really, you're *that* bad in bed?"

Schlatt holds up a hand, and the party comes to a stop. Karl pants, hands on his knee as he catches his breath, swaying dangerously on his feet. Sapnap wishes he didn't care.

"Honeybunch," Schlatt says, in a voice so carefully sculpted it could have been marble, "I thought I told you to keep your pets *quiet*."

The last word hisses through his teeth like a snake in the grass. Quackity flinches. He tugs on the

reins of his horse, brings it around to come up next to the cart.

“Sapnap, please. This isn’t gonna help you.”

Sapnap ignores him, “Some leader you are, sending your fucking lackeys to do the dirty work that you’re too scared to do. Get off that fuckin’ high horse and face me instead of hiding behind a *traitor* like a *bitch*.”

“Quackity,” Schlatt says, warningly. Quackity slips off the horse, comes right up to the bars of the cage.

“Sapnap, I get it.” Quackity swallows, and even so close he cannot meet Sapnap’s gaze. He isn’t sure he wants him to. “I know you fucking hate me, and you’re right to, but please. Stop. He’ll just hurt you, man. He’ll win whatever game you’re playing.”

“He’s going to kill me, anyway!” Sapnap snaps back, and Quackity stumbles back like Sapnap hit him. There is only dull acceptance in his eyes when Sapnap starts shouting again.

“You horned fuck! Hey! What, did your power grabs fail so bad you had to hunt us down, instead? You were the chief fuckin’ advisor and you *still* can’t take control without George literally handing it to you, what kind of shit politician are you!? Such a fucking idiot you couldn’t take over a castle we left *empty* and open for the taking? Huh? Now look at you. You’re the fuckin’ President and you’re still panting after George like some desperate loser.”

As he speaks, Schlatt turns his horse around, coming closer and closer to them. Quackity shrinks out of his way as he climbs down and comes to the cage where Sapnap is nearly red in the face with the effort of shouting. He stands far enough that Sapnap can’t reach him, though, the fuckin’ coward.

“What are you going to do, Schlatt?” Sapnap taunts, “Attack an unarmed, caged knight? Real fucking powerful of you. Are you fucking *scared*, dickhead?”

Sapnap can smell Schlatt’s anger, almost overwhelmingly powerful in how sickly sweet it is. It smells like Quackity’s fear, which is filling his nose again. He hates how familiar the scent is now.

“You’re weak, Schlatt,” Sapnap hisses, “And everyone here can see it.”

“Weak?” Schlatt’s voice scatters like shards of a broken mirror, pitched low and cutting, “I’ll fucking show you *weak*.”

Sapnap refuses to flinch, keeps his eyes open as he braces for the order to drag him out of the cage.

Which means he sees exactly how brutally Schlatt grabs a hold of Quackity and throws him to the ground. This is beyond anger, beyond being merely tormented by Sapnap’s insults. This is fury, ice-cold and terrible. Karl lets out a wordless shout of horror, staggering forwards and being pulled up short by the ropes at his wrists.

Quackity blinks placidly from the dirt road, like he expected this. A moment later, Schlatt is on top of him, and Sapnap has the perfect view to watch the tired terror explode in Quackity’s eyes as Schlatt wraps his hands around his neck.

“Stop!” Karl shouts, twisting and writhing against his bonds so frantically that blood drips from the flayed skin and lands, heavy, on the road, “Leave him alone, *stop!*”

Schlatt does not stop. Not even as Quackity’s hands scrabble against the ironclad grip on his throat,

as he chokes and gasps for air even as his face slowly begins to tinge blue.

“Sorry,” Sapnap realizes with horror that Quackity is wheezing, still trying to speak even with a voice being crushed every passing second. Even worse, he’s trying to speak to *them*, wide eyes meeting Sapnap’s with utter desperation and hopelessness, “Sorry, I’m sorry, *sorry* -”

“Sorry doesn’t fucking cut it,” Schlatt says, and Sapnap can see his knuckles going white, clenching even tighter, and Quackity’s words fall away into nothing.

Sapnap is vaguely aware that he’s started to yell too. Not insults, but the same as Karl; “Stop, don’t, you’ll fucking kill him, you *fuck*, you filthy fucking *coward*, fight me instead, fucking *stop*, STOP! Please!”

Quackity’s hands slow in their struggles, falling limp to his sides. Karl cries his name, close to hysterics.

“Schlatt, *stop*!”

Sapnap hears the voice but it still takes him a second to realize who it is that’s spoken up.

George can’t stand in the cage, but he *is* up, and his eyes are burning; his posture all his father, his expression his mother. He looks more like a king than he ever has, tattered clothes and bags under his eyes, and shaking with a righteous, determined fury.

“The caged bird sings,” Schlatt says, as Quackity’s eyes roll back. Sapnap can see the blood vessels there, red standing out against the now-blue tinge to his skin, “Got another royal proclamation to make?”

“Leave him alone,” George *commands*.

“Why?” Schlatt says. Quackity is so limp, so small under him, and Sapnap can’t do a single fucking thing. This is his fault, this is *his fault*.

“He’ll die.” George says, and only now does a tremor enter his voice, “Schlatt, you’ll *kill* him. And then what will you have to control us?”

The seconds stretch on and Sapnap is sure that Schlatt is going to finish the job. It terrifies him in a way that no betrayal could, cutting deep through the heartbreak and opening it up entirely to pure fear. As much as he hates it, he still cares for Quackity. And he can’t just sit here and watch him die.

“Fine,” Schlatt grits out, and releases his hold. There is a terrible moment where Quackity lies still and silent in the dirt, before a shuddering inhale breaks the quiet, raspy coughs wracking his frame as he curls up onto his side. He’s turned away from all of them, and Sapnap wants nothing more than to go over to him, to comfort him.

“There,” Schlatt spits, even as he stands and brushes the dirt off his suit, “Who’s fucking weak, now, huh? Didn’t even have to lay a finger on you to have you begging.”

“Quackity,” Karl cries, the rope around his wrists now stained crimson, “*Quackity*.”

Schlatt strides up to the cage, staring George down. A beat of silence, then he jabs his finger in Sapnap’s direction.

“Keep your dog on a leash, princeling,” He says, “And if you want my advice? Stop showing that

you give a shit. There are so many ways I could hurt you before we even get the capital, understand?"

George gives a quick nod. Sapnap wants to shout, rage, spit at Schlatt's face, fucking punch him while he's so close, but Quackity still hasn't gotten up. He doesn't think he's ever going to get that look on Quackity's face out of his mind; terrified acceptance as he begged an apology. That might have been his last words to him. An apology as he was murdered to hurt Sapnap.

"Quackity," Karl says again, as he begins to move, struggling to sit up as he continues to cough, still struggling to take in air, "Q, *Quackity* -"

"I'm sorry I had to hurt you, sweetheart, but you know it had to be done," Schlatt croons, sliding away from the cage and back up onto his horse, "They needed to learn a lesson, and really, you *said* they learned it the first time and they didn't. This was deserved for lying and for letting them talk about me like that. You'll make sure it doesn't happen again, right? Keep your pets well-behaved or I'll have to make it a more personal teaching moment next time."

Quackity can only cough, but he manages a weak nod. Sapnap wants to scream, but holds his tongue as Quackity turns around. His eyes are bloodshot; handprints on his throat already starting to sear themselves into his skin. Defeat echoes in every part of his frame as he staggers to his horse and pulls himself up on shaking arms. He snaps the reins weakly and the horse trots to Schlatt's side.

Sapnap cannot bear to watch him go, so he turns his face away, and hates himself for it.

Karl muffles his distress into heavy breathing and the convoy starts up again.

George doesn't speak again for the rest of the day, but he isn't catatonic anymore. Instead, he stares at Schlatt. He doesn't say anything, but Sapnap can tell it's got to Schlatt by the end of the day because he keeps looking over his shoulder and sneering when he sees George is still staring at him.

Sapnap is glad for it, because he can't keep his eyes off Karl. Karl's eyes are red-rimmed and dazed, his face flushed and dirty from the dust of the wagon, his hair flat from sweat. He keeps coughing, the dust kicked up settling in his lungs. He lags behind every few minutes only for the wagon to yank him forward in a stumbling sprint. There are moments for the next however many hours that Sapnap is sure he's going to fall and Sapnap is ready to start yelling, but Karl never does.

When Schlatt calls for a halt, Karl's legs give out as soon as the wagon has stopped moving.

"Come here." Sapnap pulls the waterskin he and George have been sipping from for three days up, "Karl."

"I can't." Karl pants, lying prone on the ground, "I'm sorry, Sapnap, I can't."

"You can." Sapnap shoves himself against the bars, reaching for Karl uselessly, "Come on. Just a little more, Karl. For me. You said you'd do anything for me, just come closer. Come on, darlin'."

Karl groans, rolling his head up to look at Sapnap pitifully. Still, he uses trembling arms to push himself up and crawls closer until he can reach up, touch their palms together. Sapnap tugs sharply, keeps tugging until Karl climbs into the little space and goes limp, his entire body trembling with overexertion.

“Just one more day,” Sapnap says quietly. “We’ll be there the day after tomorrow. About midday, if we keep our pace.”

“Fuck.” Karl blinks sweat out of his eyes, lulls his head to look at Sapnap. His eyes are hazy, unfocused. “Not much...time...I still...have to...think of...a plan...”

“Don’t worry about escaping.” Sapnap scoffs, “You’re alone, Karl. You can’t get us out. Drink.”

He offers the water skin but Karl shakes his head slowly, finally starting to catch his breath back.

“Dunno when you’ll get more. I’ll drink it all.”

“*Drink* it, Karl.” George cuts in. Karl, eyes wide, accepts the waterskin in a weak hand and drinks what’s left.

“Hi, George.” Karl says when he’s done, clearing his throat, “Good to see you’re awake.”

“You’re lucky I don’t push you off this wagon, Karl.” George shoots him a poisonous glare and Karl flinches.

“Fair.”

“Yes, *fair*.” George shifts, readjusting XD in his lap. He’s still holding onto him, hasn’t let go even once. He hasn’t eaten in days and, now that he’s speaking again, Sapnap hopes he’ll be able to convince him to take some of the rations Quackity left.

“If it helps at all,” Karl looks at the waterskin in his hands, “I’m so sorry. I didn’t think it would turn out like this.”

“Yes, well.” George sniffs, “Just know that if Sapnap gets hurt again, I will *personally* skin you before XD can do it. Understand?”

“Yes, George.” Karl nods rapidly, “I’ll get you all out of here. I know it’s a lot to ask, but trust me. I’ll make this up to you.”

George doesn’t answer him, looking Sapnap over, instead. He nods. Sapnap nods back, understanding, and forces one of the dried strips of meat into his hands. George eats it mechanically, no complaints in sight. It’s unlike him. George complains no matter how much danger he’s in. It makes Sapnap feel even more hopeless than before. If even George is quiet, Sapnap has nothing left.

His eyes drop to XD. If only he were awake. Dream would have known what to do, what to say, to get them out. Or he’d have a plan worked out for when they reached the capital, something to make sure George and Sapnap were safe.

Mostly, he wishes XD were awake so he could ask the questions he’d been too raw to ask before. So he could see just how much of Dream really was still there. He wanted to know if XD had meant it, when he said he didn’t love like Dream had.

Quackity comes to them later than usual, but still before the sun has truly set.

He’s carrying a new waterskin and a plate of rations again,hardtack this time.

“Quackity.” Karl starts to move, clammers to his knees so he can face him, “Quackity, your neck...”

Quackity's throat is a perfect ring of thick, purpling bruising. The one on his cheek is starting to yellow around the edges but this one is still fresh enough to be almost entirely red and purple.

Quackity hesitates and Sapnap sees him swallow. He opens his mouth, but all that comes out is a painful croak.

"Don't talk." Karl says immediately, "It's okay. Just...come here? Come here, baby."

Immediately, Quackity starts to blink, wet tears nearly breaking over his cheeks. He steps closer, enough for Karl to carefully lift his bound hands. The ropes have dried brown with his blood and Sapnap is sure his wrists are ravaged but he touches Quackity's jaw like he can't feel the burn of the rough rope at all.

Quackity's eyes close as Karl carefully inspects the bruise. Quackity breathes in deeply and Karl makes a noise of pain.

"Oh, *Q*..." Karl breathes, "Does it hurt?"

Quackity shakes his head but Karl just stares at him until, shame-faced, he nods.

"I'm sorry." Sapnap says, shifting to the side of the cage to get a closer look at the marks. "I didn't...I didn't think he'd go after you. I'm sorry."

Sapnap hesitates, but he's weak. He's weak, he knows it, and he can't resist when Quackity looks like that, so sad and lost and defeated. He reaches out of the bars, both hands open and slow as they find Quackity's shoulders.

"Sapnap..." Karl starts, but Sapnap ignores him in favor of pulling Quackity close. The plate and waterskin are both dropped as Quackity stumbles forward until they're both pressed to the bars and Sapnap can look him in the eye and drop his voice so that no one else will hear him.

"I am...so fucking angry." He admits. "I'm so fucking angry at you. Both of you."

Quackity winces, nods. He tries to speak again but the rasp is painful to hear and Sapnap covers his mouth.

"Stop. Listen to me."

Carefully, Quackity nods against his hand.

"I'm fuckin' furious. But you don't deserve this. No matter what you did, or how angry I am, I don't want this to happen to you."

Quackity blinks again. Sapnap feels the tears on his hand, just a few that roll over his fingers before Quackity yanks abruptly away. He kneels to collect the plate and dropped rations and the water. He thrusts them all into Karl's grasping hands and bolts before either of them can say another word.

"Quackity!" Karl calls after him but it's too late. Quackity disappears inside the tent in the middle of camp.

"Fuck." Karl punches the floor of the wagon and collapses back against the wall. "Gods damn it."

Sapnap watches the tent for a moment longer and then turns back to George, who's looking at him.

George peers closer, eyebrows drawn, and Sapnap can't meet his eye. He knows that it's pathetic

that he still cares about them after the betrayal. But he can't help it. He'd already let them in. He's loyal to a fault. He still...he still cared. He wishes he didn't, but Prime, does he.

"Go to sleep, Karl," He says, in the end, for lack of anything else, "You should rest while you can."

It's a testament to how tired Karl is that he doesn't put up more of a protest. He shifts, putting the rations and water closer to Sapnap, wincing as his ropes press against his broken skin. Exhaustion catches up with him sooner rather than later and he drops into a fitful sleep, neck at an awkward angle that Sapnap knows is going to hurt him more in the morning. He still can't bring himself to wake him, though.

"You're not very subtle, you know," George says, quiet as he leans back against the bars. It's a ghost, a shadow of a teasing back and forth that this should be, not the tense position with aching limbs and a broken heart.

"Don't," Sapnap says, "Just... don't."

"It's okay," George says, softly, "I get it." Then he pauses, worrying his lip as he pulls XD's hand closer to him, running his hand over the soft fabric of his gloves.

"I saw how much they made you happy. And for what it's worth, Sap? I think you made them happy too."

Sapnap stifles...something. Not quite a sob, not quite a protest. A mix of both. He's held it together for so long; he can't break now. Not even in front of George. Because if he does, he doesn't know if he can put himself back together again.

"Doesn't fucking feel like it," He says instead, voice gruff.

"I'm pissed off too, don't get me wrong," George says, "And I don't know if I can forgive them, but you were right when they said they don't deserve this. I think it's deeper than what it appears, Sapnap."

"And what about you?" Sapnap snaps back, "George, they're going to fucking *kill* you. And I don't know if I can stop them."

"I know," George says, faintly. "I know, Sapnap."

"Gods," Sapnap chokes, "Gods, how did this all get so fucked?"

George swallows back a sob, turns it into a laugh, "I think it's always been a little bit fucked."

And then they're laughing, a little bit broken, a few tears here and there, but it's laughter; quiet, slightly hysterical. They're about to die. They're allowed to be a bit hysterical.

"I'm sorry," George says, after they've calmed down somewhat, "I'm sorry that you had to find out about XD the way that you did. I'm sorry I never brought it up. I'm sorry that I didn't know."

"George," Sapnap's words stick in his throat, "George, you can't blame yourself for something you didn't know."

George inhales, careful and deliberate, "It's not even that I didn't know. It's that I assumed. I assumed you didn't want to talk about it. I assumed you would be fine with XD, in the end, and that it would all work itself out. I assumed you knew that the throne would take you, if we went

back. My dad, he used to say -”

“Assuming makes an ass out of you and me,” Sapnap finishes the familiar phrase.

“And I’ve been an arse. I’ve been a total asshole to you, Sapnap, and I should... I should have done better. Been a better friend. I thought you knew, but that doesn’t mean shit. I should have told you; all of this was for you. The running, the hiding, it was never for me. It was to save you from that fucking throne. Always for you. I should have told you.” George lifts his head, eyes wet with tears, “You’re the most important person in the world to me, Pandas, and I’m so sorry I ever made you feel like you were anything less.”

If Sapnap speaks now, he’ll lose it. So he just reaches across, takes George’s hand, and hopes that the touch communicates everything he cannot say aloud. There is a long pause as they simply sit, listening to the other breathe, XD lying between them.

“XD told me,” George says carefully, after Sapnap’s grip on his hand has lessened somewhat, “What Dream was to me. And that he -” He cuts himself off, wincing.

“Don’t,” Sapnap says softly, “Don’t hurt yourself. It’s okay.”

“It’s not,” George says, breath whistling through clenched teeth. “He’s your best friend. And I... XD, I -”

“You don’t have to say it.” Sapnap says, “I was... I was mad before. Because I thought you were moving on. That he didn’t mean anything to you, because you were already falling for someone else. I didn’t have a right to be angry at you for moving on, but I should have known. You... you were just loving him differently. I should have known you two were saps enough to end up falling for each other *twice*.”

George chokes out a laugh. There is another silence, but it’s comfortable. Comforting. George is the one to break it again.

“What... what was he like?”

“Dream?”

“Yeah,” George says, valiantly covering up his wince. Sapnap raises an eyebrow but George only nods with a determined expression.

Sapnap sighs. “Kind. Proud. Fucking hilarious when he wanted to be. Far too much of a troublemaker to be a knight, but you kept him around anyway. Some kind of princely authority, gods, everyone would listen to him no matter what stupid shit he was spouting. Do you remember manhunts?”

George frowns, brow furrowed as he tries to reach for memories that aren’t there and finding only aching emptiness. “I remember... hunting? But I don’t know what.”

“Who,” Sapnap gently corrects, “The mad bastard would get us to chase him through the forest, to see if we could catch him before he got to the edge of the forest. Every time, it was like he came up with another trick to outsmart us all.”

“Sam helped once, didn’t he?” George asks, and Sapnap nods.

“And Bad, though only the gods know how Dream convinced him into it. It was a good day, though. A good hunt.” Sapnap leans back then, against the iron bars, cool in the night air, “I’d like

to do another, one day. I had a whole trap planned for the next one. I miss them.” He adds, wistful.

The wind whistles through the trees. Sapnap can almost hear the shouts of his younger self, challenging Dream to a duel in a lava pit, one of his more outside-the-box ideas.

“I know you don’t remember,” Sapnap says, cautious, “But he - XD, I mean. How much of him is...is human?”

“Is Dream, you mean.”

“I just,” Sapnap doesn’t really know why he’s explaining this like he’s apologizing, but he is, “I just want to know if there’s anything of him left. Because he... those guards, he tried to do something, to save *me*, and he called me -”

“Pandas,” George finishes, gentle.

“If it’s *him*. Mostly him, and if he does... *care*...for me, then I...” Sapnap’s words stick in his throat again, and he has to close his eyes and breathe in deep through his nose before he can continue. “Then the last thing I said to him was that he was a monster.”

“Oh, Sap,” George says, heartbreakingly soft, “He still loves you. Of course he does. The first fucking thing he said to me about you was that you needed more rest. That was before I even gave him a name, before I ever trusted him. He cared. He -” And now George is the one swallowing his words to avoid tears, “He told me, back in the Crimson Forest, that being with me, with us...” he scrubs at his eyes, unable to finish his sentence. “He loves you. He does. I don’t doubt that, not for one second.”

“And all I’ve done is fail him, over and over again. I lost him.”

George shakes his head, “You didn’t lose him. He’s been with you all along. Even if you didn’t know it.”

“I wish,” Sapnap says, “I wish you had told me about him sooner. Before Karl and Quackity.”

“Yeah,” George says, “Yeah, me too.”

“Do you think,” Sapnap starts, before thinking better of it and stopping.

“Do I think what?”

Sapnap takes a deep breath, before letting all the words rush out at once, “Do you think we could still get him back? Dream?”

George pulls up the gloved hand again, presses it to his lips, clearly thinking about how to answer before he does.

“I don’t know, Sap. I really don’t know. But if there is a way, we’ll do it.”

“George -”

“I can’t promise anything Sapnap. Not when I might be headed to my own execution. But I can promise that if I ever have the chance, that I’ll try.”

“I’d die before I let them kill you. I’d die.”

“I forbid it,” George says, a small smile tugging at his lips, despite how seriously he says it, “I

absolutely forbid it. My last act as the prince of Kinoko. You're not allowed to die for me, Sapnap."

"Okay," Sapnap says, and they both know he's lying.

"Whatever happens," George says, softly, into the sweet night air, "We're together."

"Yeah," Sapnap nods, leaning his head back, tilted up to the stars, thinking of bards and knights and merchants, and fingers worn to the bone for love, "All three of us."

The arrival to the capital is an exercise in humiliation. George ran in the night and he left as the respected prince of these people. Now, he is rolled through the center of town in a roughly made wagon, caged, beaten, exhausted and half-starved. People pause to gawk, stare at their forcibly-made prodigal prince. Sapnap meets every eye he can, refuses to be cowed under the stares. George doesn't bother opening his eyes. He just stays resting against Sapnap, fingers slowly drifting through the blond of XD's hair.

"Karl!?" someone breaks through the crowd and falls into place next to Karl, who looks up from where he'd been steadily watching the ground so he doesn't trip and grins big and wide. It pulls at the bruises and split lip but Karl hardly seems to notice.

"*Chandler!*"

"What the fuck are you doin' tied to a wagon, my man?" Chandler, the stranger, looks at Karl's hands thoughtfully, "When you said you were on a job, we didn't think you meant a dangerous one."

"You have no idea." Karl hesitates, "Chandler, I'm -"

"Hey!" A guard finally notices a new body walking with them and comes back, sword partially drawn, "Get outta here!"

"Hey, hey, just gettin' the goss, calm down!" Chandler puts his hands up, immediately taking a few steps back, "I'll leave. Catch ya later, Karl."

"See ya'. Let the others know I want a family dinner." Karl says quietly as Chandler starts to walk away. Chandler doesn't acknowledge him, just disappears back into the crowd.

The guard sends Karl a suspicious glare, cuts it to Sapnap just to be sure, and then returns to the front of the wagon to get back in formation.

"Who was that?" Sapnap asks, keeping his voice low.

"A friend." Karl flashes him a smile. It's nowhere near the bright, happy look Sapnap is used to seeing on Karl's face, but it's something. It's the first real smile he's seen since the Crimson Forest. "Don't worry, Sapnap. Whatever happens, I'm going to get you out. All of you."

Sapnap doesn't believe him. No matter what his heart says, Sapnap doesn't believe Karl. Karl is a liar, he's been lying to him since the moment they met - Sapnap doesn't believe him. He can't.

Their convoy continues on to the castle, reaching the gates at mid-day. As the familiar portcullis rises, Sapnap tries desperately not to look around. He doesn't want to see his parents, doesn't want them to see him locked up, a returned failure.

He can't help it though, in the end, and he glances around the courtyard, looks up at the walls to see if they're watching.

He doesn't see them, to his immense relief and immense disappointment.

Instead, he sees a vaguely familiar man. An avian, with wings that would dwarf Quackity's whole body, let alone his small wings.

"What is this?" Phil demands.

Phil. Sapnap hasn't seen Phil in at least three years; his last visit was to check in on Wilbur's placement in the Kinoko government. (He'd brought Tommy and Tubbo and Ranboo, who had run around and caused chaos in every room they'd touched. Tommy had climbed Dream to sit on his shoulders and Dream had nearly been taken down by Tubbo's flying leap.) Technoblade usually stood at Phil's side. The fact that he wasn't told Sapnap that he and his merry band of faux-revolutionaries were probably still wandering the wilds.

"It's the prince, of course!" Schlatt calls up, "Just as you asked! As the democratically elected president, I promised the people to hunt him down. Here he is, ready to stand trial for his crimes!"

"The crime of being born?" Phil demands.

"His crimes will be outlined by the court." Schlatt shuts him down mercilessly, "You said he needed a fair trial. I said okay. The judges are all here, ready to gather for the trial tomorrow night. Now, Phil, you wouldn't be goin' back on your word, would you? We had a deal."

"The deal wasn't that you dragged him back in chains, Schlatt." Phil says, stern. For all that he gave up his empire, he is imperial in every way that matters.

"Be careful now, Phil." Schlatt says, "You have no real authority. You're here as an advisor, nothing more."

Phil watches them for a long moment, eyes settling on George and XD for a long moment, before he turns with a swirl of his green and white coat and disappears.

"Someone take the librarian away." Schlatt turns away from the walls and waves a hand, "Pay him. Throw him out of the castle. He isn't allowed back in."

"Hey!" Karl snaps, "You can't -"

"I can." Schlatt looks down at him from his horse, Quackity a silent shadow at his side. "Take my kindness for what it is, Mr. Jacobs. Don't come back."

"You aren't getting rid of me that easily." Karl yanks at his hands when he's untied from the wagon but the guard at the end of his make-shift leash pulls back and nearly drags Karl to the ground.

"Karl, just go." Quackity speaks up, voice firm. "Leave."

"I'm not leaving you." Karl snaps back, "Either of you. Any of you."

"Get him out of here." Schlatt turns away dismissively and the guard pulls Karl away with little trouble despite Karl digging his heels in.

"Sapnap!" Karl shouts, straining back toward him, "Quackity! I'll be back, okay!? Just trust me!"

Quackity doesn't watch him be pulled out of sight but Sapnap can't help but watch the whole time, fists clenching so tight he's forced to let go of XD's hand to avoid hurting him while he heals.

"Now that he's taken care of." Schlatt looks at Quackity and then at the cage.

"Pull the knight out. Take him to the dungeons. You know the place."

"Don't fucking touch me," Sapnap tenses up, bringing his arms up to fight them off when the guards start to tear the bars out of the wagon to reach him. He swings when one makes a grab for him and his fist connects with a face hard enough to send the guard sprawling. "Don't fucking touch me -"

"Kid, stop fighting." Schlatt says with the sort of tone one might speak to a toddler mid-tantrum, tired and bored. "I have the upper hand here."

Sapnap looks at him to spit something truly foul at him, only for his words to die on his tongue. Schlatt's got a hand in Quackity's hair, forcing his head back to bare his bruised throat. He's not even *doing* anything, but Sapnap still feels his body freeze in place.

"Don't -" he lurches forward, uselessly, and Schlatt smiles. Quackity's eyes are squeezed closed, shoulders up. Expectant.

"Sapnap, no," George grabs at him, "Stop, don't let them -"

And Sapnap should listen. He knows where his loyalties lie, he does, he *knows*, but he can't take his eyes off the implied threat and the way Quackity looks so small, so defeated, being used against Sapnap with the bruises Sapnap helped put on his skin on display.

Sapnap gets dragged out of the cage to the loud shouts of George.

"No!" George reaches for him through the bars and Sapnap struggles against the three men pulling him away. "*Sapnap!!*"

"George!" Sapnap rips a hand free, tries to grab George's. Their fingers brush, the tips hooking together, before the wagon begins moving again and they're torn apart. The wagon goes deeper into the castle, toward the stables. "George!!"

"*Sapnap!!*" George yells for him one last time before he's out of sight, just like Karl.

"Relax." Schlatt sighs, standing in front of him as Sapnap is forced to his knees, hands on his shoulders and pinning his arms behind his back. "You'll see him again tomorrow evening, for the execution."

Quackity is released from Schlatt's hold and he stumbles, stops a few steps away and stands statue-still, eyes blinking open but only to stare at the ground. Sapnap wishes he would look *up*, just fucking look at Sapnap.

But he won't. So Sapnap just glares up at Schlatt, locking his jaw against the rage he wants to spew out. He still sees the ring of bruises around Quackity's neck, though, so he keeps his lips pressed into a tight line.

Schlatt looks right back down at him, eyebrow raised.

"Huh," Schlatt says, suddenly leaning forward and grabbing hold of Sapnap's chin.

Sapnap can't help it, but he glances at Quackity, seeing the tension spike in his shoulders, the clench in his jaw.

"Even after all that rough ridin', he could still be of use." Schlatt roughly tilts Sapnap's face to the side. "You seem the strong and steady type. I could use some muscle around here when I'm king. You want to ditch that doomed prince of yours? Hell, I'll even throw in Q as an incentive. I'll bet you've been dyin' ta' let out all that anger on the one that betrayed you, huh? Any way you want him, as long as you remember that at the end of the day, he's mine. What do you say to that?"

"I'd rather throw myself onto my own sword than look at you another minute, let alone *work* for you. You're a disgusting waste of space, Schlatt." Sapnap spits, and Schlatt wrinkles up his nose in disgust.

"Pity. You would have been a wonderful trophy."

"Schlatt," Quackity speaks up, tense, "Schlatt, you promised."

"I promised nadda, sweetheart. Zilch. I said, if you could keep him behaved, then *maybe* you could keep him. But this one just signed his own death warrant. I wouldn't call *that* being good. Besides, I don't like the way you've been makin' eyes at him."

"Please," Quackity says, "I - I'm not *looking* at him, I swear, I'm - I'll stay, I'll never leave again, just, please -"

"Aw, did you get attached? I've told you before; once you name them, you always wanna keep them," He pinches Quackity's cheeks, "I've had just about enough of your bargaining for disrespectful trash, birdy. It's getting annoying, and the last thing you want to be is annoying, right?"

Quackity doesn't answer. His eyes, big and desperate, have finally fallen to Sapnap, who looks back and doesn't look away.

"*Right*, Quackity?"

"...Right."

"Quackity." Sapnap tries as he's forced back to his feet, "Quackity,"

He doesn't know what he's trying to say. That he trusted him? That he hates him? That after all of this, Sapnap still can't get the weight of him when he's sleeping on Sapnap's chest, his voice when he laughs, the soothing rhythm of his breathing when he is walking Sapnap through his overwhelming emotions, out of his head? That he loves him? That, after all he'd lost, Quackity and Karl had been his only wish, something he'd wanted just for himself?

Whatever it is he conveys, it cuts Quackity to his core. He sees tears fill those mismatched eyes.

"Sapnap -" Quackity reaches out for him, "Wait!"

The guards don't wait. He's yanked into the cobblestone building that houses the dungeons, dragged down staircase after staircase until a whole hall of damp, empty cells appears.

That, apparently, isn't deep enough. He's taken through a wooden door at the end of the hall, what he'd assumed was a guard room - it is a room, but there's nothing in it except a large grate in the floor.

Sapnap struggles again, but he's weak and tired and sore and his spirit is battered. His fight isn't enough even with only two guards on him. One opens the grate in the floor and Sapnap gets one last glimpse of the door to the room before he's free-falling through the hole.

He lands with an *oof*, fall graceless. The grate above him clangs closed.

"I'd hate to be you, man." One of the guards says quietly through the gaps in the grate and then Sapnap hears footsteps fade away, quiet conversation eventually die out as he is left behind. They take the torch with them, leaving him in the dark.

Sapnap lays on the ground for a long while, staring into the dark. Eventually, he blindly pulls himself to a far wall and draws his legs to his chest. He wraps his arms around his legs and puts his face in his knees.

Alone, truly, for the first time in his entire life, Sapnap finally lets himself break apart in the deep isolation of the castle dungeons.

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

Hello hello hello!!!! Wednesday is here which means UPDATE DAY :D

First of all we just want to say thank u to all the people reading along with us as we update <3 your comments on every chapter have made us so happy!!! we hope you enjoy the rest of the fic as we continue to approach the ending. We are back to a shorter chapter this week but the last two will be a bit thicker to apologize <3

In other news: ART ART ART ART ART!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Please go visit @draw_Rudy on twitter and look at [THIS!!!!!!](#)

It is sapnap in armor + one of karl's best lines in the whole fic imo DOESNT HE LOOK AMAZING????

Please ALSO go visit @amusingghost on twitter and see [THIS QUACKNAP DOODLE](#) of one of my other absolute favorite scenes ISNT IT SO GOOD???

Lastly, **PLEASE** take note of the chapter warnings. This chapter deals HEAVILY with these tags and it gets very dark in certain places!! These warnings are not between any tagged ship and keep in mind that this fic is tagged with promised happy ending :)

Chapter cw: Onscreen violence, implied violence/coercion, **graphic descriptions of intimate partner violence and abuse**, suicidal ideation and thoughts

Quackity thinks that Schlatt loved him, once. There had been a time, when he was still a half-feral hybrid from the streets of Kinoko, when Schlatt looked at him with pride, fondness, even affection: a younger hybrid with potential. He was his protege, a rising star in a comet's cabinet. Schlatt was a politician with infinite promise, and Quackity melded so naturally with his ideas, his ambitions, that they soon became one and the same. Maybe Quackity only melded so well because he liked the way Schlatt talked to him when he agreed, but he honestly can't remember anymore.

For all that Quackity drew attention, with his loud personality and even louder voice, he blended in easily among the other members of Schlatt's entourage as the politician rose ever higher through the ranks of Kinoko's upper classes. He studied day and night, his thirst for knowledge only matched by his thirst for power, for that same influence that he had been denied for so long. It was difficult enough to be a hybrid, let alone a flightless avian. But with Schlatt, he thought that he had found a home, a family, a person that loved him. Schlatt valued his mind, his charisma, his fast-talking and his even faster thinking. He was good with people, where Schlatt might come off as too abrasive.

Even when Schlatt joined the Royal Advisory Council and told him to keep out of sight around him, so he could work his way around any number of Schlatt's potential allies and try and ply information out of them without suspicion, Quackity trusted him. Even when Schlatt told him to keep his wings bound to his back. Even then, Quackity looked at Schlatt and he saw *home*, saw

safety, saw love.

“They’re so beautiful, sweetheart,” Schlatt had said when he brought up binding Quackity’s wings and Quackity had preened with the praise, “They should only be reserved for people that truly appreciate them.” Quackity had agreed. That was always how it went, in those early days; Schlatt said Quackity should do something, because he was so good, and Quackity would do it to prove exactly how good he was.

Even when Schlatt stood, head of the Royal Advisory Council, and planned the downfall of the royal family alongside Eret and Wilbur, Quackity stood by him. And even when Schlatt had come to him in the dead of night, and told him about how much a political engagement would help his plans, and how Quackity was so charming and so good with people and so likable...

“I need the person I trust the most near to them,” Schlatt had said, smelling like champagne and promises, fingers working through Quackity’s wings with soothing, steady touches. “That’s you, Q. I need you to try and keep them on our line, alright?”

“Alright,” Quackity agreed, dizzy with the praise and his wings being touched and the trust being put in him.

When Quackity bumps into Eret the next day and smiles, shy and pink-cheeked, and Eret stares for a little too long before going bright red, Quackity knows Schlatt is going to be pleased.

Their courtship is quick and low-key to protect Quackity from anyone who may use him against Eret, an up-and-comer on the same stage as Wilbur and Schlatt but with a distant royal connection that makes them technically fit to rule. Schlatt tells Quackity what to do and Quackity does it and Eret eats it up. Quackity whispers that Eret would make a great leader between chaste kisses and Eret agrees. Quackity whispers that maybe Eret deserves the throne as they walk abandoned trails on a date, Eret deserves the crown instead of whatever weird co-congressional bullshit Wilbur Soot is currently yammering about in the back halls of the council building, and Eret agrees. When Eret gives him a ring, the only person he’s excited to show is Schlatt.

“Good job, birdy.” Schlatt says, approving and fond, and Quackity rides that high all the way until the night of the coup.

He has nightmares, after the coup. It is one thing to be used to street brawls, used to being silent and careful and taking out enemies with a well-placed blow or just fuckin’ running like his life depends on it, and quite another to be in the middle of a war that started and ended in one night.

He has nightmares, but he doesn’t always want them to stop. It’s the only way he can see the stranger again.

Despite being Schlatt’s right hand and Eret’s affianced, Quackity had never been to the castle before that night. Eret had wanted him there, though, to see them ascend, and Schlatt had okayed it with only a little reluctance.

Quackity comes after the fighting has started, when Eret sends for him. Eret had sent a knight and Quackity follows closely. It’s only halfway to the throne room that his knight meets a party belonging to the royal family. It’s barely a fight. They’re surrounded and his knight is slaughtered in seconds. It’s only the years of experience that Quackity has gained dodging Schlatt’s drunken swings that save his head from the sword attempting to end his life. It catches him across the face, splits the skin, blinds him - he’s too scared to truly process the pain. He just shoves the knight, off-balance already, to the floor and runs.

“A traitor!” One of the knights had shouted as Quackity had raced away, “Get him!”

Quackity ran, taking any turns he thought would save him.

It was this mad dash that brought him to the stranger.

Dark-haired with stubble and kind eyes, built like a warrior. That was what Quackity saw when he’d stumbled around the corner, dizzy with panic and pain.

“They’ll - They’ll kill me if they find me,” he’d stuttered. “I don’t wanna die, man. Please. Please.”

The stranger hadn’t hurt him. Instead, he’d pulled him into a closet. It was small and hot and Quackity had been bleeding so much he was a little dizzy. But the stranger was warm in a comforting way, and had stayed with him until his panic and the stitch in his side had abated. Quackity had been crying, and the stranger had held a hand over his mouth to keep him quiet but Quackity hadn’t minded. It had comforted him that he had someone who knew what he was doing when Quackity was lost and hurt and scared.

And then the stranger, a knight of some sort, who hadn’t even checked to see what side Quackity was on in this war before helping him, had carefully peeked into the hallway before guiding Quackity out.

“Here,” he’d lead Quackity to another door, “Take this hall to the kitchens. You’ll find a way to the grounds from there, okay? Stay down, stay quiet.”

And then, as chivalrous as any storybook hero, the stranger had handed him his own sword - *netherite*. “For protection. Stay safe.”

And then the stranger had been gone and Quackity had watched him go in awe.

Quackity had watched until he disappeared in a hurry, knowing exactly where he was going. And then he’d gone to the kitchens and he’d hidden in the pantry and waited, cloth to his face, until the fighting had died down. And then he’d slowly crept out of the kitchen and wandered until he’d found a terrified servant to lead him to the throne room where neither his fiance nor his boss was happy to see him so late.

“This will be faster than a doctor.” Schlatt had said and then fed him a healing potion for his wound. It had scarred terribly. Eret wouldn’t look at him for days, focused on the throne and all the changes that needed to be made with a new ass on the fancy seat. Schlatt had been too busy, too, plotting in the library.

So sue him, for developing a small crush on the guy that saved his life, who’d taken time to make sure Quackity was safe and could escape, even when the stranger was obviously busy.

Quackity tried to find him in the following weeks, wanted to thank him, to tell him he hoped he got where he needed to be in time. But he couldn’t find him, amongst either Eret’s or Schlatt’s men. If he was the Queen’s guard, he could only hope that his stranger made it out alive.

He didn’t tell Schlatt about his nightmares. The other man was already too busy with plans upon plans upon plans; Eret, for all of Quackity’s charm and guile, was a disappointment to Schlatt within weeks of taking the crown. The throne’s power lay unclaimed.

“Break the engagement.” Schlatt says one night, a bottle in and a new book open in his lap, “The throne won’t take that fool.”

Quackity doesn't question how he knows that. He leaves his ring in Eret's bedroom and disappears from Eret's life. Only two days later, the throne truly does reject Eret, drives them nearly insane in the span of twenty minutes right in the middle of court, and there Wilbur Soot is, only hours after Eret is escorted to a healer, calling for an election.

Schlatt was busy with that, afterward. And when his duties were done for the day and Schlatt left him be, Quackity's dreams were all his own.

Something shifts the day after the election.

Quackity should have known, really; Wilbur was always so smartly dressed, so well put together in his revolutionary uniform, even as their debates turned ever more vicious. In hindsight, the deterioration was obvious. The election kept him busy and, slowly, that state deteriorated, until the Wilbur who heard the results was almost shabby, hair wild and untamed, smelling of sweat and exhaustion and ambition. He strides off the stage with eyes filled with all the feral rage and pent-up anger of a summer storm, the breath before the tragedy, but Schlatt is turning to Quackity with a huge victorious grin, and Quackity cannot bring himself to worry just yet.

Quackity only drinks a little that night, aware that Schlatt is more than likely to drink himself under the table in celebration. When he finally passes out, stinking of whiskey, Quackity puts him to bed and ignores how his wings ache. The alcohol was supposed to take the edge off but they are still tender and sore from his punishment so he finds himself awake when *something* makes the entire castle tremble. It comes from the throne room.

Schlatt sleeps like the fucking dead so Quackity is alone as he stumbles down the spiral staircase, sword strapped hastily to his hip, coughing as dust and debris rains from the ceiling.

When he makes it to the main building, he has a feeling that he knows where the chaos comes from. As he approaches the throne room, his suspicions are confirmed - there's shouting and a vicious hum, like voices moaning in agony. The shout is very familiar and Quackity swears, pushing open the doors just in time to see one Wilbur fucking Soot reeling back from the glowing throne as the castle shakes once again.

It's... honestly, when he tries to describe it later, he can't. Through the dust in the air, he *thinks* he sees what might be a fight; a human figure plunging a sword through the heart of something utterly unfathomable. There is a flash, utterly blinding, and Wilbur, terrified, sounding more like himself than he had for the entire election, screaming "*TOMMY!*"

In the dark spots of Quackity's vision, there is a figure; long-cloaked, tall, floating above the throne. Then they are gone, and Tommy is staggering, dazed and bewildered, where a second ago had been only empty space.

Wilbur scrambles to his feet and pulls his brother into his arms. Quackity catches a glimpse of his face; desperate, overwhelming relief. Quackity has no idea what happened but Wilbur thought he was about to lose his little brother. It's clear in the shaking line of his shoulders, the way he holds on to Tommy and doesn't let go, the clumsy way that Tommy pats him on the back.

"What the *fuck?*" Is all Quackity can think to say.

Wilbur turns to him and his eyes are - well. Quackity had spent a lot of time around Wilbur in the run-up to the election, through campaigning and everything that surrounded it, when he'd been tasked with targeting Technoblade and had ingratiated himself into Wilbur's little family. He thought he knew his eyes; warm brown, bright with ambition and, sometimes, something more

when he watched Quackity and Technoblade. He hadn't realized how cloudy they had become, glazed with a madness that was only apparent now that it was gone. His eyes are clear, swimming with tears. There is a streak of white in his hair that wasn't there before.

"Quackity," Wilbur says, and he keeps a firm grip on Tommy's arm, ignoring his protests ("Wil, Wilbur, let go, I'm fine, but guess who I - I saw him, I *saw* -") and pulling both Tommy and Quackity out of the throne room before any guards come to investigate, "Quackity, you can't let him sit on that throne. You *can't*."

"What?"

"You *can't* let Schlatt have that seat, Q!" Wilbur had shaken him by the shoulder, awakening fresh pain in his wings from the rough, jerking movements.

"What the hell did you do, Wilbur?" Quackity shouts after him as Wilbur lets him go and races away with his brother, "What the *hell* did you do?"

When Schlatt asks him, later, why he let them go, he doesn't have an answer for him. He says that Wilbur was stronger and Quackity was scared to fight him - but Quackity knows the truth. It was the brutal honesty in Wilbur's voice. That was the first time that someone had ever implied that Quackity could somehow *stop* Schlatt from doing something he wanted to do and it had shaken him to the core long after Wilbur had disappeared.

Karl is... Quackity doesn't have words, really, for what Karl is.

At first, he's fucking annoying. He's nosy and too friendly and eye-catching, with his bright cloak and curly hair and soft eyes and big smile. He wants to ask Quackity all sorts of questions and talks for hours.

Quackity can talk for hours, and does, but that doesn't mean he isn't suspicious as fuck about this turn of events. He's already on thin ice with Schlatt after all the failures lately; Eret, Technoblade (his wings twinge in phantom pain at the mere thought of his name), and then Wilbur and Tommy getting away... He can't afford to fuck this up. Especially not because he says the wrong thing to this random merc Schlatt hired on. Karl's just here as a silver tongue, he's just supposed to make it a little easier to gain the prince's trust until they can lead them close enough to the capital for Schlatt to send an order out for them.

Alternatively, he's there to spy on Quackity, because Schlatt has lost trust in him.

That possibility is a strong one, but it hurts, so Quackity pushes it away. Either way, Karl is there, and he's fucking annoying.

He's annoying when he laughs and when he blinks at Quackity sleepily when Quackity nudges him awake for his turn on watch, and he's annoying when he sits too close to Quackity and points at the stars and tells stories about each one. He's annoying the first time Quackity falls asleep on watch and, instead of waking up to angry yelling and insults, he just wakes up leaning against Karl's shoulder while Karl watches the forest around them.

Karl stays annoying, until one day he's - he's not.

That day starts normally. They've been traveling together for close to two weeks. They're set to meet another group of mercs in the coming days who have heard rumors of a group of two matching the description Schlatt has put into the wind of the princeling and his knight and they're talking about that ("You're my assistant, Q, we've been over this," "No fuckin' way, man, I want

to be a businessman! An entrepreneur!” “That’s too complicated! What are your business plans?” “That’s none of *your* business, I have an aura of mystery, asshole -”) when the bandit strikes.

One moment, there is a man with a desperate gleam in his eye crossing swords with Quackity and Quackity is feeling - not confident at all, but at least attempting to look it, and then the man is shoving his blade aside and swinging a heavy fist. He socks him right in the ribs and Quackity goes down with a shout, the pain radiating deep, deep in his entire rib cage.

It hurts. It hurts. Suddenly, Quackity isn’t on the road. Quackity is on a bed, and he’s curled in on himself, and his wings are bleeding, bleeding - *missing pieces* and he can *see them*, see what was taken from him, just sitting there, just *sitting there outside of him*, and Schlatt steps back unsteadily, shears bloody and dripping from one hand, the other still fisted from when he’d punched Quackity’s chest so he’d quiet down his crying.

“I didn’t want to do that.” Schlatt shakes his head, sounding heartbroken, “I didn’t want to do that, sweetheart. You can’t even glide now. Why’d you have to go and fail, huh? I warned you there’d be consequences, and you still came back the way you did. What am I supposed to do now? Just take the whole fuckin’ things? Huh? Answer me. Quackity, answer me!”

“I’m sorry,” Quackity gasps through the pain, trying not to throw up again, all he can smell is blood and vomit, “S-sir, please, I’m sorry, stop, I’ll be better -”

“Quackity!” Schlatt yells at him, “Quackity!”

“I’ll be better, sir, *stop* -” Quackity sobs, shoving at the hands suddenly on him. He can’t handle anymore, he can’t, he’ll die, he’s dying now, he’s bleeding, his wings are - his *wings*, his *wings are* - “*Stop, please!* Please, stop, please -”

“Quackity!” Hands, new hands, not Schlatt’s hands, too soft, too small, too gentle, cup his face. “Quackity, baby, listen to me. Can you hear me?”

“I can,” Quackity nod desperately, “I’m listening, I’m listening, I promise, please don’t -”

“Where are you?” the hands have a voice now. It’s gentle. Schlatt’s gentle with him, too, after. Every time, after, he’s gentle. He apologizes and he holds Quackity and he sighs and laments that Quackity has to be punished so often because Schlatt hates doing it. Quackity wishes he was better, so Schlatt wouldn’t have to do it, too.

“I’m -” he starts to say, “Your - your room. I’m in your room, sir.”

“No.” The voice says and thumbs stroke the tears off his cheeks, “No, you’re not. Where are you, baby? Look around for me.”

Quackity realizes he’s closed his eyes tight. Carefully, he blinks them open. There is sunlight. No, that isn’t right. It had been night when his wings - it had been night but the sun is out now.

“That’s right. Do you see where you are?”

“Outside.” Quackity says, a little wondrously. His chest is starting to clear up. He isn’t screaming anymore.

“Mhm.” The voice has a face now. Bright eyes, curly hair, a cloak that hurts to look at. A nice smile. Karl.

“Who are you with?” Karl asks, wiping at Quackity’s face again, touch so soft.

“Karl.” Quackity answers slowly, eyes starting to drift close again as the adrenaline abruptly leaves. He goes limp and Karl is there to catch him, huffing low.

“Yep, that’s me, baby. Just me, just you, just us. That fucker took all my potions, though. And my potion stand! Bastard.”

“Sorry.” Quackity tries to sit up, “I should have -”

“No, no, it was my fault.” Karl cuts in, hands trailing down to his shoulders and squeezing firmly, comforting, “I threw the bag at him and told him to go, so he did. That was my fault, I should have fought him.”

“He could have hurt you.” Quackity tries to blink but his head is so fuzzy. He’s exhausted.

“Are you worried about me?” Karl teases, but it’s lighthearted and soft, “Don’t be. I can hold my own. This is my job, remember? Maybe I just had all those potions just in case this happened so I could throw ‘em and run away.”

“That’s an expensive defense, dude.” Quackity finally manages to blink. When he opens his eyes again, the world is less blurry. He’s still fucking exhausted. “What...Karl?”

“Hi, Quackity. Oh, there we go.” Karl smiles, carefully releasing him, “That was intense, huh?”

“I don’t...what happened?”

“You got hurt.” Karl explains simply, “And had a panic attack.”

“Fuck.” Quackity puts his face in his hands. The panic attacks. He’d hoped they wouldn’t happen, out here. He doesn’t have Schlatt around to protect him if he has one of his fits in public like he usually does. *Fuck*. He’s practically a sitting duck, pun fully intended. One wrong hit and he’s fucking *laid out* reliving his punishments like he hadn’t learned enough from living through them in real-time. They can last *hours*, no matter how much Schlatt tries to shake him out of them - what if he falls into one while they’re with the prince? What if he does something, *says* something while he’s lost in his own damn mind and -

“Quackity.” Karl cuts in, voice soft again, “Stay with me.”

“I’m right fucking here!” Quackity snaps, louder than intended, and then immediately feels himself shrink in tight. He’s expecting a blow, or anger, for Karl to push away with a scoff and some cruel words to put the cherry on top.

Instead, Karl just hums. “Good. I don’t want you to float away or anything, I’d be pretty lonely out here. Are you ready to stand up? I’ll help. Let’s go ahead and set up a camp, okay? We need to figure out what we still have and what we lost.”

Quackity...doesn’t know what to say to that. Had he imagined himself shouting at Karl?

“Quackity?” Karl peers closer. “You okay?”

“It’s mid-day,” Quackity says after a short pause, ignoring the second question. “It’s too early to camp.”

“It isn’t.” Karl shakes his head. “We need to do a recount of supplies. I don’t know what all I had in the bag I threw and what I have in my duffle. Sorry for the inconvenience, I know we’re time crunching.”

“We’re...” Quackity blinks, hard, and looks at Karl again. His hair looks soft. “It’s okay.”

“Hm?” Karl looks at him, laying on the ground, and smiles. “Okay?”

“Yes, I can stand.” Quackity struggles to his feet and Karl helps him, soft hands guiding him to standing. “Let’s camp.”

“Great, I think I saw a good spot a little bit back. We can stay there the rest of the day. Maybe wait for our partners to show up.”

Quackity nods without answering, so tired he can barely walk straight.

Karl chatters as they walk, standing closer to Quackity than usual. Quackity wants him to step away and stay close at the same time. As they walk, it’s like the temperature takes a sudden plunge. Quackity starts to shake, arms coming up to wrap around himself tight.

“Cold?” Karl hesitates, and then unties his own cloak and drapes it around Quackity before Quackity can say no. And then it settles over him and Quackity can’t convince himself to push it off. Karl’s cloak is warm and soft and a feeling of such contentment rolls over him that he snuggles in without even thinking about it.

Karl doesn’t laugh at him, just starts talking again. He talks all the way back to the little campsite he’d chosen, and he talks while Quackity stands uselessly in the middle while he makes a fire and sets up a tent and puts out the torches to light when sunset begins to bathe the world.

Quackity doesn’t really start to feel himself again until he’s sitting by the fire, Karl’s cloak snug around him, carefully nibbling at some salted jerky.

Karl sits across from him, looking at him through their small fire. He smiles at Quackity, a quick flash of a button nose and squinting eyes, and Quackity’s heart - flips.

“You called me baby.” Quackity says carefully during the next lull in Karl’s neverending talking.

“Huh? When? Oh.” Karl sucks in his lips, guilty, “Sorry, was that bad? Sorry. Pet names just kinda happen when I’m panicking. I won’t do it again.”

“It’s fine.” Quackity says before he can stop himself. “I don’t mind.”

Karl looks at him over the fire, the gentle smoke obscuring his eyes enough that Quackity can’t read what he’s thinking. Either way, he smiles.

“Yeah?”

“Nothing else.” Quackity snaps back. “If you call me fuckin’ sweetheart or some shit -”

“I won’t.” Karl holds up three fingers, “Scout’s honor. And I’ll only break out the baby when I need to.”

“You won’t *need* to.” Quackity grumbles, sitting back and snuggling deeper into Karl’s cloak to hide his face. He pulls a cigarette out of his pack, lights it on an errant flame. No one’s ever called him baby before. It’s always *sweetheart* from Schlatt, or *honeybunch*, or some other name that makes Quackity feel a little bit like Schlatt’s forgotten he’s not talking to some stripper whose stage name he’s forgotten. If he never hears *birdy* again - his wings twitch in their restraints and he winces into his next inhale. God, he fucking hated that one.

“Course not.” Karl grins, nose wrinkling up and eyes squinting. His voice brings Quackity back to the conversation at hand and he exhales slowly, lets the smoke fill the space between them until Karl goes back to talking about some statistics on axolotls, of all things.

Annoying.

Fuck, Karl is annoying. Karl has to be annoying. Quackity can’t afford for him to be anything but annoying.

Quackity doesn’t realize at first.

He still dreams of the stranger, but it had been dark that night. Dark, and his mind had been so cloudy with pain and his vision blurry with blood. Since the coup, he’s had dozens of dreams about him and every time, Quackity’s mind shifts his face around just a little more until he’s more a shining light than a person.

So Quackity doesn’t realize at first, until he’s standing atop a very tall rock, watching Sapnap’s face as he carefully helps Karl down despite his complaining. Something pings familiar in that serious expression, the way his eyes turn focused and his mouth turns down, the confidence in his stance when he nods for Quackity to let go and then swings Karl to the ground with ease.

Sapnap is his stranger.

The discovery should shock him, but it doesn’t. Sapnap has always seemed so familiar. The first time they’d met, in the woods, Quackity had just known instinctively that if he stuck close to him, he’d survive the creepers and he *had*. Despite his rough words, Sapnap has been nothing but unceasingly kind to both he and Karl, faking stones in his boot and purposefully slowing the pace just so Quackity can keep up. He’s a *knight*. He’s Quackity’s stranger.

“Okay, Q.” Sapnap looks up at him once he has Karl settled, waving casually, “You still good up there? Ready to come down?”

Quackity blinks, shifts on his feet. Only this time last year, he could have glided down. He could have unstrapped his aching wings and spread them out and simply let the wind bring him to safety. He can’t do that anymore. He’ll never be able to glide again.

“I don’t think I thought this through.”

“None of you did.” Sapnap flashes a smile. “But I’ll help anyway. I want you to do what George did, but less violent, okay? Just slide down the side of the rock. We’ll catch you.”

Quackity doesn’t let himself flush. Karl is watching, eyes full of amusement and security. Quackity is nervous. He knows that, were Schlatt here, he’d be losing patience with him, and it’s making Quackity’s breathing go a little haywire, the thought that soon they will both get annoyed with his unwillingness to jump.

They don’t though. They just - talk. They talk to him, until he works up the courage to do as told. When he slowly slides down far enough, he feels Sapnap’s fingers brushing his ankles. When he lets go, he can’t help but scream but Karl and Sapnap are both here, Karl’s hands careful at the base of his spine but not going any higher, Sapnap’s hands gliding up his sides until he has a firm grip on his hips that stops Quackity from meeting the ground in a painful pile.

Quackity ends up facing Sapnap, those hands still on his hips. He looks between him and Karl, letting the pleasant surprise flow through him unabated.

“Oh. You caught me.”

“Yep.” Sapnap says, voice a little odd. He’s looking at Quackity, right in his eyes, his cheeks steadily growing redder.

“Thank you.” Quackity doesn’t break eye contact, for what feels like the first time. Sapnap is a little scary, for all that Quackity finds him so comforting and it’s only now, like this, that Quackity lets himself look into his eyes. They’re warm and brown. Quackity likes them.

“You’re welcome.” Sapnap says. The hands on Quackity’s hips are starting to warm up. Quackity kind of likes that, too. As an avian, he doesn’t retain heat well. He’s always just a little cold.

Still, because he can’t keep his mouth shut and he doesn’t know what else to say, he says: “Your hands are...getting warm.”

“Sorry! Sorry! Are you okay? Did I burn you?” Sapnap immediately pulls away, much to Quackity’s displeasure. He tries not to show his disappointment.

“No, I’m fine.” Quackity brushes down his shirt, grinning at how flustered Sapnap suddenly looks, “You’re hot but not that hot, hotstuff.”

He and Karl high-five while Sapnap blusters around and yells at George. That night, sequestered in the cave, Quackity dreams of that night again. Sapnap is clear in his memory now, kind, serious eyes and strong arms around him, keeping him safe.

Quackity knows exactly how many days it’s been since he last wrote Schlatt. It was before the mountain. Long before they were transported into the jungle, and that was weeks ago, now. The enchanted book he’s been using to pass his messages along stays hidden deep in Karl’s bag. If he opens it, Schlatt will be able to pinpoint his location so he’d dug to the very bottom and put it right there.

He can’t make himself throw it away, not yet. But he’s thought about doing it and that’s terrifying.

Sapnap breathes deeply under him, sleeping soundly. There are still traces of tears on his face, tracks that dried while he’d recounted why he and George were running. Quackity doesn’t think he realized he’d cried through most of it.

Karl is sleeping, too. Quackity wishes he had Karl’s ability to just throw a thought away. He remembers earlier, the conviction that Karl had spoken with.

“I love Sapnap.” He’d said. “I love him. I want to stay with him. I want *us* to stay with him, because I love you, too, Quackity.”

“He won’t forgive us.” Quackity had said severely, even as his stomach flipped and turned over at Karl’s words, “If he finds out, he’ll never forgive us, Karl, are you getting that!?”

“He will!” Karl had said with that conviction, sounding so *sure*, “He’ll be angry, and he’s allowed to be, but he’ll forgive us. He loves us, too. I know he feels the same way we do.”

“Karl...” Quackity had trailed off, *aching* for even an ounce of his confidence. “I can’t.”

“I’m...I’m going to come clean.” Karl had admitted. “I won’t implicate you, not if you don’t want me to. But I need to tell him because I want...I want something real. With both of you. I’ve never wanted that before, but I do.”

Karl had said to take some time to think, because Quackity hadn't known what to do. He just wanted the little fights to stop. He hated being at odds with Karl. He had to keep things from Sapnap, things that would destroy the trust and care that had been building between the three of them, but he hadn't had to hide anything from Karl and it was awful, fighting with him.

So now he lays in the cramped little bed, nearly on top of Sapnap, just listening to his heart. His hand is tangled with Karl's on Sapnap's belly, their fingers loosely interlocked on Sapnap's bare skin. He listens to their deep breathing, Karl's entire frame moving with it and Sapnap's barely moving at all, totally opposite in their similarity. He thinks.

Real. Karl had said something real. What they have now - it's nice. Quackity...Quackity has never had anything like this. Not even with Schlatt. Karl and Sapnap, they've never...they've never punished him, when he was wrong or failed. Schlatt would have dragged him across the mountain when he was being slow, would have made Quackity leave to find food during the storm. He would have yelled at him in the town, when he'd been hurt. He wouldn't have carried Quackity along after, when he couldn't walk. He wouldn't have sewn his wing up, he would have let it heal ugly and raw to teach Quackity a lesson.

Quackity can't imagine Sapnap doing any of those things, or Karl. He likes being with them. Quackity is *happy* when he's with them. Sapnap touches him so kindly. He checks in to make sure Quackity is comfortable, almost every single night. He's never touched Quackity's wings after that first time, but he offers to preen them occasionally and doesn't get upset when Quackity says no. He looks at Quackity with these *eyes* that Quackity isn't even sure he knows he's doing, but it makes him warm from the inside out. Karl jokes around and laughs with Quackity and never tells him he's being too loud about it. He likes to hold Quackity's hand and wrap an arm around his shoulder and cuddle close when they sit together, but he never feels suffocating. He's never been upset when Quackity shied away, only giving him space until Quackity was okay to be touched again. He called Quackity's wings beautiful and left it at that. He calls him baby like he doesn't even notice he does it anymore. It's not just when he's panicking, it's when he's excited or wheedling Quackity into doing something stupid, or when he has a question.

Quackity thinks he loved Schlatt once, too. But now, when he thinks of him, he just thinks of pain, and fear, and the smell of whisky and vomit. He thinks of his feathers littering the bed around him, some chopped in half or bent and broken, and all of them covered in blood along with the sheets he'd had to change the next morning. He doesn't want to open the book because he's terrified that Schlatt will find him and he'll be punished again. Quackity knows exactly how many days it's been since he purposefully decided to abandon his mission, and he can guess how angry Schlatt is getting. If he ever goes back, he'll lose his wings. He knows it. Schlatt will make him lay down and he'll take those sheers to the base of his wings and he'll hack until they come off and there's nothing Quackity will be able to do about it.

If Wilbur catches up again, he'll recognize Quackity. He'll tell them. Whatever he may have felt for Quackity at some point, it won't be enough for him to stay quiet. Quackity will be found out either way.

He's breathing too quickly, he realizes. His throat is closing. He can't get enough air in his lungs. His wings ache, he wants to stretch a joint he doesn't *have* anymore and the feathers shutter and shake with energy he can't expel. He starts to sit up, vision going dizzy -

"Quackity." Sapnap rasps, voice sleepy. "'s wrong, angel?"

Quackity freezes and then goes lax as a familiar, gentle hand pets down his spine, careful even in sleep to avoid touching his wings. He likes when Sapnap calls him that. Right now, it fills him

with so much guilt he could throw up, but he still likes hearing the soft way Sapnap says it, without even thinking about it. Like he thinks it fits; fits *Quackity*, of all people.

“Did I wake you up?” He chokes out, “Sorry. Go back to sleep. Sorry.”

“Shh,” Sapnap opens his eyes, half-lidded, still mostly asleep. “You’re okay. Bad dream?”

“Mhm.” Quackity lies, carefully laying his head back on Sapnap’s chest. He hears his steady, strong heartbeat. His skin is almost uncomfortably hot, but Quackity is *so cold*. It feels so good. Comforting. Kind of like he’s at home, even lost in a jungle. He feels Sapnap’s arm tighten around him, his palm flat on his back. Karl shifts, too, hand spasming in Quackity’s before his fingers close more firmly and he sighs.

“Bad dream?” Karl blinks a few times as he wakes up, “Gross.”

“Yeah.” Quackity huffs a laugh, voice strained. “Gross.”

“You’re safe.” Sapnap says, fingers stroking his skin soothingly. Slowly, the energy in his wings dissipates, following Sapnap’s touches until he’s relaxed again, exhausted.

He meets Karl’s eyes and they’re understanding. Karl doesn’t let go of his hand.

“We’re here.” Karl says quietly and Quackity blinks back the tears. He knows Sapnap feels them but he doesn’t call Quackity out. They both just hold him until, eventually, Quackity falls into a fitful sleep.

The Crimson Forest is deadly hot. Quackity can barely breathe through the humidity and sweat stings his eyes and makes it impossible to see. Karl is even worse off, barely able to move on his own by the time Sapnap finally calls a halt.

Quackity is collapsing before Sapnap even finishes talking. His wings itch and ache. It takes up every last inch of space in his brain, the overwhelming *discomfort* and pain. He wants to pluck every single fucking feather out if only to stop the *itching* he can’t reach. No matter how his wings flinch and flutter, it is never-fucking-ending and it’s driving him crazier than the heat is.

He rests his hands on his head, tries to ignore how awful and hot his skin is, and uses the weight of his exhaustion to stop himself from attempting to touch his wings. It will only be uncomfortable and painful and now isn’t the time.

“Q, angel?” Sapnap catches his attention, “You still with me?”

Quackity hums an affirmative, nods into his arms. “Just hot. Itchy.” he admits.

“I’ll bet.” Sapnap sounds worried. He runs a hand down Quackity’s spine and Quackity tries his best not to press into it, beg for him to somehow make it better. “Is it your wings?”

“God, I want to rip them off.” Quackity feels them twitch and flutter against his will, energy that can’t escape. They’ve been twitchy ever since he has started letting them free full time; he still isn’t quite used to the itch as opposed to the ache and now the heat is causing both.

“How can we help?” Sapnap asks and Quackity knows he means it. He knows Sapnap would do whatever he could to make this easier on Quackity, on any of them. The urge to ask for help with his wings has his mouth opening but he manages to keep it to himself by shaking his head and hiding his face in the brittle grass. He feels Sapnap pat his back and walk away, probably to go

check on George.

His wings continue to flinch under their own discomfort. He regrets not asking Sapnap to touch them, if only for a moment, just to help appease some of the itching, but he knows he can't. No one's allowed to touch them. It's already bad enough that he's had them out for so long while his wound heals and it's going to be so fucking hard to get them used to being pinned again when his healing is done. When he was recovering from his last punishment, Schlatt had said keeping them pinned in place would help, would put less strain on them so they'd have time to adjust to the new normal of being *without*. The last few weeks have been a trial in re-learning his wings when they're free, re-learning how to move with them, rebuilding muscle that had wasted away in the last years of keeping them hidden. Even before his punishment, he'd gone a long time with them belted down. Even Eret hadn't been allowed to look at them, let alone *touch* them. It's been years and years since anyone but Schlatt had -

Quackity squeezes his eyes shut, a hot flare of shame and anger erupting. *Fuck*, he hated this. Why did he *care* what Schlatt wanted right now? Why couldn't anyone else touch them? Because Schlatt thought they were pretty? Why does Quackity have to lay here and suffer under the discomfort and constant itch of scabbing pulling at his feathers and them growing in wrong and needing to be preened just because *Schlatt*, miles and miles and miles away, said so? Why does Quackity have to listen to Schlatt about this, when he's already disobeyed so often?

Is it going to be that he let someone else touch his wings that gets him his worst punishment if Schlatt finds him? No. It'll be that he stopped communicating. It'll be that he's let himself fall for them. It'll be that he's actually been thinking about what Karl said, that he's actually been considering what life might be like if he truly gave it all up and ran away.

If he goes back to Schlatt, his wings being preened won't be what Schlatt focuses on, not at first.

But who says he has to go back? They're days away from the Badlands. Karl seems *so sure* that Sapnap will forgive them, will let them stay. Karl said he wanted something real. Maybe Quackity wants something real, too. Maybe Quackity is sick of belting his wings down. Maybe Quackity is sick of not being able to talk to Karl and Sapnap freely, talk to them without the constant, crushing guilt of what he's supposed to be doing. Maybe Quackity is sick of living in constant, *constant* discomfort just because Schlatt fucking *told him to*.

And maybe, just maybe, Quackity is tired. He's so tired of fighting what he feels for them, what he *wants* from them both.

When Sapnap comes back to him, Quackity is trying to keep his breathing steady.

“Q?”

“D’you think...” Quackity swallows the lump in his throat. He wants this. He wants something real. He wants to do this. He wants to stay with Sapnap, with Karl. He wants to stay with them, and leave Kinoko, and never go back to that castle, that bedroom, that *life*. “D’you think you could, um...”

“Whatever you need.” Sapnap says, and Quackity *believes him*.

“My wings.” Quackity blurts out. “They’re...they’ll feel better. I mean, if we...if you...preen them.”

From nearby, Karl jolts straight up, the cloth Sapnap had laid on him flying off.

“Quackity, you...”

“Don’t make it a big deal.” Quackity looks down, “It’s just - it’s uncomfortable. And I can reach them, but it won’t be done properly, you know, so -”

“Q.” Sapnap takes one of Quackity’s hands and squeezes comfortingly. “Do you really want that? For us to fix your wings?”

“I...” Quackity looks at their hands. Schlatt had never asked. No one had ever asked, *especially* not after they already got a yes. Sapnap never assumes. Sapnap never makes Quackity feel uncomfortable or pushes him or is anything but kind and gentle to him. Karl, too - both of them, they have proven time and time again that they *care*. That they want Quackity to feel safe with them because he *is*. He sniffs. Fuck, his eyes are stinging. “Yeah. Yes, I do. I want you to fix them, please. Karl, you - you can help. If you want.”

“Of course, baby,” Karl says with no hesitation. “Yes, of course, yes. Anything you want. Anything. Does this mean...what we talked about...?”

“Yeah.” Quackity has to clear his throat. It’s terrifying. It’s fucking terrifying, maybe the scariest thing he’s ever done, to say what he’s saying. “Yeah, you’re - you were right. This is - I want this. I want this so much. More than I’m worried about - about that. You’re right.”

The next few minutes are a blur of getting set up. Quackity doesn’t know the protocol. The last person to really touch his wings had been Schlatt. He has only vague memories of anything before that; warm soft hands carding through the unmarred feathers, feeling safe and cared for. He doesn’t remember who it was, and those memories are hazy, overwritten in all the other times where Schlatt pulled too hard on a feather, dug his nails into the delicate skin. The last time Schlatt had touched his wings, it had been to push them back under the belt because it hurt too much for Quackity to move on his own. He had hated it; how, even then, after all that Schlatt did, his wings couldn’t help but push into his hands, still desperate for contact.

Neither of them even hesitate when he says he doesn’t want to be on his stomach and George leaves without Quackity needing to even look at him, towing XD with him. He ends up facing Karl while Sapnap sits behind him. This is good. He can do this.

Sapnap lets his hands rest on Quackity’s bare sides, palms a comfortable warmth even in the oppressive heat of the forest. Quackity can feel how close he sits and he resists the urge to lean back against him, let Sapnap wrap him up and just hold him until Quackity can convince his body that he isn’t cold, that there isn’t any reason for him to be shivering as badly as he is.

“If you want me to stop, just say the word. One word, and we’re done. Okay?” Sapnap says, voice soft.

“Okay.” Quackity nods. “Do you know what you’re doing?”

“Not a clue.” Sapnap says and it makes Quackity giggle nervously, Karl joining in.

“Just...” Quackity counts as he breathes until his voice stops shaking. “Gentle. Please. Be gentle and you just...straighten them out. If any are broken, or...or loose, you can wiggle them a little. If they’re bad, they’ll fall out so you don’t have to tug.” Quackity squeezes Karl’s hands and Karl holds him tight in response. “Please don’t tug on them.”

“I won’t. Not a single tug.”

“And if he does, I’ll give him the ol’ one-two.” Karl jokes. Quackity smiles wanly and Karl rubs little circles into the backs of his hands.

“Ready?” Sapnap slides his hands up Quackity’s back and Quackity hums an affirmative, tensing in preparation for the first intrusive touch. It never comes. Instead, Sapnap drops his forehead to Quackity’s shoulders and matches their breathing, just as Quackity did for him in the cave. Slowly, Quackity manages to slow his breathing and relax, just a little.

“Hey.” Sapnap rubs circles into the skin of his back, touch soothing and comforting, “Karl and I are here, angel. You are safe. Nothing is going to touch you right now. Do you believe me?”

“I know.” Quackity squeezes his eyes shut. Sapnap has no idea, the relief in him. “I know.”

“Okay.” Sapnap says and then there is a touch - it isn’t intrusive. It’s testing, though, barely there, just against the top of his left wing. He can’t help but gasp, dropping his head forward onto his and Karl’s curled hands.

“You’re okay, baby,” Karl says, “You’re doing so good.”

There’s a reason that Quackity didn’t like when people preened him, even before Schlatt. It’s an intimate act, letting others touch his wings. It releases all sorts of good chemicals in his brain and his instincts go all haywire. Petting through his wings was how Schlatt asked him to seduce Eret and Techno, how Schlatt got him to agree to most of his crazier ideas. Quackity is vulnerable like this, and not only because someone is so close to the sensitive skin and bones of his wings. He’s always been weak to praise, to being loved, and preening is such an act of service. Even without all of the *feels nice feels safe feels so good* chemicals rushing around, making his shoulders go lax and his spine arch as he spreads his wings for more, Quackity would be gone.

Sapnap is gentle when he touches sensitive feathers, but his hands are sure and firm and perfect. He can tell it’s Sapnap, can feel the other in every motion, every brush of skin on feathers; the low warmth of his hands, comforting even in the heat of the jungle. It’s *Sapnap*.

Quackity doesn’t realize he’s starting to haze out until he realizes that he can hear Karl speaking to him and his tone is honey-sweet and warm but Quackity can’t actually understand what he’s saying until he forces himself to tune back in.

“You’re being so brave.” Karl whispers into their hands, “Q, baby, Gods,”

Quackity wants to respond, but words - simply won’t do. He sighs, instead. He presses his face to Karl’s knuckles, hopes Karl can feel his smile, hear the soft hums of happiness he just barely vocalizes. Sapnap is slow and methodical but he doesn’t pull or tug, doesn’t hurt him at all. He avoids the truly aching parts, where Quackity was punished, but the itching finally, *finally* starts to fade under Sapnap’s attention.

Quackity blinks slowly as time passes, the world in a soft glowing haze. It’s Sapnap, it’s Karl, and that’s all he needs. All there is.

“Still here, baby?” Karl tilts Quackity’s face up with a finger under his chin, smiling, and Quackity smiles back out of instinct, loose and soft.

“You’re so cute,” Karl sighs, but his voice is *fond* and Quackity wants to wrap himself in it. “What am I supposed to do with this?”

Quackity would shrug, but he likes that Karl thinks he’s cute. He likes that Sapnap is taking time, that they were both enthusiastic about helping him, that they think his wings are beautiful. He likes *them*. Instead, he presses his face into Karl’s hands and barely suppresses a wordless noise of pure happiness. It might have been a chirp, if he let it out. From Karl’s giggles, fond and loving, he

heard it.

Sapnap slowly comes to a stop, and Quackity doesn't like that at all. He wants Sapnap to keep touching. The itching is still there but, more importantly, Quackity *wants* him to keep going.

"Here." Sapnap says and he sounds like he needs to drink something. "Q, do you want Karl to -"

Oh. The thought of Karl also touching his wings is a good thought. He wants that, too. He doesn't know how Karl is supposed to do that if he's holding Quackity's hands, but he's smart and Sapnap is smart and they will figure it out together because Quackity doesn't think he could help at all right now. He feels like a pile of happy, comfortable mush even despite the desperate itch of one of his wings - because it's just *one* now. Sapnap helped him and it felt *good* and didn't hurt at all. It didn't hurt. The thought almost brings him to tears, the feeling overwhelming when he's already feeling *so much*. But he trusts them not to hurt him. Quackity can trust Sapnap, and Karl, even, to help and he's so glad he did because he feels so much better.

"Yes." Quackity manages to say, "Yes, please."

He's rewarded with another brush of fingers against feathers and it sends a shiver down his spine.

"Sorry." Sapnap moves around so Quackity can see him and Quackity shakes his head because it wasn't bad. It wasn't bad at all.

"No," he tries to reassure him as Sapnap creeps fingers between his and Karl's hands. Quackity lets him, happy to hold his hands, too. Karl pulls away and that sucks but then Sapnap is there, taking over his field of vision, those kind, warm hands in Quackity's, keeping his perpetually-chilled fingers snug. "S okay. 'S good."

Sapnap looks at him and Quackity blinks back, turning into the touch when Sapnap wipes at the corners of his eyes.

"Hey, angel. Can you look at me?" Sapnap smiles lightly and Quackity smiles back. It's instinct now; not that it wasn't before, but this is deeper. Stronger. Instinct with a capital I.

"If you call me that, I'll do anything you want." Honestly, Quackity would do anything Sapnap wanted him to even without the name. But Quackity likes when Sapnap calls him *angel*, as much as he likes when Karl calls him *baby*. It's always fond; never condescending or hurtful or accompanied with a slap on the back or a punch to the shoulder. He always hated pet names. He doesn't hate theirs.

He's distracted with the nice way Sapnap laughs, isn't prepared for Karl to touch his wing with exploring, careful fingers. His breath catches and his wings tremble. Karl pets through apologetically but, like Sapnap, his movements are steady and soothing as he carefully adjusts feathers and down. It's different to Sapnap, in a way that he can't quite explain. Karl is slower; a librarian's hand, efficient and precise. He doesn't flinch from the scars, but runs his fingers, sugar soft, over them. Taking in the whole story, and not looking away.

"Q." Sapnap calls his attention back, "Angel, you doin' okay?"

Quackity hums.

"How do you feel?"

"...Goopy." Quackity decides, "Like a marshmallow."

"I'll get you all the marshmallows you want when we're at the house, okay?" Sapnap strokes his cheek and Quackity leans into it. Sapnap's warm hands make his thoughts go hazy once more, comforted and cared for in a way that he doesn't think he has ever felt before.

Quackity hums again. "Been so long..." he admits.

"Since you had a marshmallow?"

"No," Quackity sighs, shuddering as Karl pulls *something* away that finally fucking removes one of the worst itches - and it doesn't even hurt, just a gentle tug and *bam*, instant relief. Karl strokes over the spot and if Quackity could purr, he would be. As it is, he barely suppresses a chirp. "Since I was preened." He continues.

"Is it nice?"

Quackity has no words to describe it so he just says "'s so good."

"Good." Sapnap strokes the back of his hands and he sounds like he means it, like he's actually happy that Quackity is having a nice time.

Quackity just nuzzles his face into Sapnap's knuckles like he did with Karl and tries to hold still. The better they feel, the more his wings want to *move*, flutter and twitch with his excitement at his wings being *groomed* by people he trusts and who want to keep him safe while he's like this, vulnerable and easily malleable. Neither of them has asked him to do anything at all, not this entire time, and his heart is so full.

Karl is less careful, but no less gentle, and more willing to take risks in his touch. He doesn't hurt Quackity, doesn't tug or test but he isn't afraid to be playful, either, to touch a sensitive spot after he realizes it's sensitive or tease until Quackity's feathers are fluffed up and he's shivering with quiet giggles.

But, like with Sapnap, Karl eventually finishes his job.

"There." Karl strokes down both wings at the base, touch light. "All done."

It's like strings are cut. The moment Karl's hands leave his wings, Quackity tilts forward, right into Sapnap's arms. Sapnap catches him easily, gathers him up and lets Quackity shove his face into his chest to hear his heartbeat. Without the hands directly on him, he just floats in the haze of borderline-euphoria, knowing he's relaxed and safe and the itch is finally gone.

"I've got you, angel." Sapnap says as Karl comes to join them, familiar arms hugging him and familiar hands on his back to support him. "We've got you."

They do. They have him. Quackity is exhausted and *happy*. He's so happy. Maybe the happiest he's ever been in his entire life.

Maybe later, when he wakes up, he'll rethink everything. Maybe he'll panic, or maybe he won't. But now, in this moment, he's made his decision. He wants to stay with them. He wants to *be* with them. He wants to feel like this again, and again, and again, with them.

This is what he wants.

Quackity keeps it together until everyone is sleeping.

He doesn't remember much of the fight, actually, he thinks as he rolls another cigarette. He knows Techno was there.

The last time he'd seen Techno, it had been the piglin patting him on the shoulder and saying, "Sorry, man. But I don't swing any way in particular, especially not for a plant, so this ain't gonna work on me. Tell Schlatt he can go fuck himself."

Quackity had not told Schlatt that. But he'd had to tell Schlatt that he'd failed, that Techno wasn't interested, even after all the time Quackity had spent working his way into Techno's little family. Schlatt hadn't been happy. He'd been furious, actually. He'd been *so mad*. Quackity had tried, he'd tried so hard, everything that had worked with Eret and some things that hadn't, but Technoblade wasn't *interested*, and Technoblade knew who he fucking was so it was always going to be harder anyway, and -

And Schlatt had been so mad.

Quackity's wings twitch and flutter, phantom pain. He stares into space, smoking, trying not to remember how it felt for Schlatt to order him to lay on his stomach on the bed, how it felt to feel Schlatt sit on him and say, teetering with drink, "You made me do this, why'd you make me fuckin' do this, birdy? Why couldn't you have just done what I needed you to do?"

It's all he can think about. He doesn't actually remember the bite of the shears, but he remembers the pain in a distant sort of way. The way it had exploded. The way it felt like he was dying, how he hadn't even been able to struggle because of the shock. He remembers laying there, blood and vomit and terror and so *much* pain, and wishing that he'd died the night of the coup.

Tonight, he wishes he'd died the night of the coup, too, when those knights had first found him. He wishes the sword had been just a little longer, that Schlatt hadn't inadvertently trained him to dodge quite so well.

He's been made. Quackity knows it. Sapnap and George, they're upset. They're wrapped up in XD - *fuck*, XD, Technoblade had put a whole fucking sword through him. And now he's hurt. And also, apparently, he's Dream. This is news.

Quackity takes a drag. When he breathes out, the smoke curls up into the sky. He's the only one awake. They hadn't even set up watches, they'd just - everyone had fallen asleep, in this familiar patch of trees.

Convenient. Quackity holds the smoke in his lungs for as long as he can before he has to exhale. He hates this forest, too. He hates this area. He hates being so close to the capital, those streets, that *bedroom*. He hates it so much.

Karl and Sapnap are curled up together, Sapnap's face still drawn and puffy from crying. Quackity can't look at them for long.

Tomorrow, once things settle down, Sapnap will start to think about what Wilbur said, in the fire swamp. He'll start to connect things. He'll be angry.

He'll regret saving Quackity. He'll regret helping him. He'll regret all of it, just like he regrets helping Quackity the night of the coup. He'll throw him away, because this - all of this was Quackity's fault.

Deep in Quackity's gut, he knows that if he hadn't distracted Sapnap that night, if Sapnap hadn't helped him, he would have got to the throne room in time. He would have helped Dream, they

would have escaped with George together. Sapnap wouldn't have had to face any of the pain. The mourning, the grief, the weight of sorrow he's been carrying around his neck - all of it was Quackity's fault.

Quackity is the reason Sapnap's gone through so much pain. He's the reason George has lost something so important, something George can't even understand that he's lost. He's the reason Karl is out here, the reason Karl almost died in the Crimson Forest. He's the reason Technoblade was even still around to hurt XD, because Quackity wasn't able to get him in place for Schlatt to get rid of him. For fuck's sake, he'd had ample opportunity to get rid of Wilbur or any of his brothers for a time but he'd been so soft. He'd cared about them so he hadn't done what he should have, what Schlatt had *told him* he needed to do. Every problem, every pain, every hurt that any of them had faced on this journey, it was because of Quackity's weakness. His inability to protect himself, to stand up for himself, to recognize threats and take care of them before they could ruin everything.

Schlatt was right. Quackity had forgotten, between the way Sapnap had stroked through his wings so gently and how happy it had made him, even in his panic, to hear Karl say *I love you*, but he remembered now. He understands. Schlatt had been right all along, and no one would ever truly be able to love him because Quackity...Quackity didn't deserve that. For all the pain he'd caused.

What he deserved was what Schlatt would do to him when he got his hands on him.

The enchanted book, open to a blank page, sits at his side. Like Sapnap and Karl, he can't look at it. He's got a special cigarette rolled, a mix of tobacco and the special powder mix he kept in this book for emergencies. He hadn't thought he'd need it, but here he is.

He just lets his regular cigarette burn, breathing in steadily and wishing that the burn was enough to make it so he couldn't think anymore.

This is what he deserves.

Quackity's place is on the ground at the foot of Schlatt's bed.

He's expected to be there before Schlatt goes to sleep, directly after he's finished checking in on - on the prisoners. Schlatt is always, always waiting for him, sitting with his arms crossed and a frown on his face.

Tonight, he looks annoyed and disappointed. Quackity would apologize, but even if he pushes past the pain, his voice won't work through the bruising.

"It's been a long fuckin' day," Schlatt says shortly, "And you're still making me wait. What the fuck is wrong with you? After you just let your new buds talk about me like that in front of everyone?"

Quackity can't answer. He's raw from Sapnap's hug, from those words. Sapnap had said he didn't deserve this, but Sapnap still didn't *know*. How could he say that to Quackity, if he knew that Quackity was the reason he'd lost his best friend? Schlatt's words hurt, too, but they can't touch the wound that Sapnap's had left.

Schlatt must see the pain in his eyes and think it something else because he sighs and drops the annoyed expression. Now he just looks sad.

"Come 'ere, birdy." He opens his arms.

Shaking, Quackity has no choice but to go to him.

Schlatt pulls him to the edge of the bed and wraps his arms around him, tucks Quackity's head under his chin and holds him close. Quackity can hear his heart beating. There were some nights when hearing that heartbeat was the only proof Quackity had that Schlatt was human.

"I'm sorry I hurt you." Schlatt says into the quiet of the tent. Quackity squeezes his eyes closed. Schlatt's hand is resting on one of his wings, gently stroking through the feathers, and if Quackity weren't so tense, he'd be shuddering in fear. "I just...that demonic little bastard was talking, and you weren't even sticking up for me! After everything we've been through together, everything I've done for you...after you just left me for months. I thought you were dead, for fuck's sake. Do you know how worried I was?"

Quackity breathes. He keeps his eyes closed and tries to pretend that he's in someone else's arms. He doesn't deserve it, but he wishes *so* badly that he did.

Schlatt pets the back of his head and Quackity has to muffle a hitching sob.

"It's okay." Schlatt shushes him, "I'm here now. It's okay."

It's not okay. It's not okay, and that's Quackity's fault, too.

When Schlatt eventually releases him from his hold, Quackity goes to the ground without protest. He waits until Schlatt is sleeping and then creeps, slowly, slowly, to the enderchest Schlatt keeps in his tent. He opens it silently, sorts through the magically stored objects and rations until he finds what he's looking for.

Karl's coat still smells like him, and sweat, and Sapnap. Quackity carefully, carefully, pulls it around himself. It's the only way he can sleep, if only for a few hours, before he puts the cloak back in place so Schlatt is unaware when he wakes.

Quackity blinks sunlight out of his eyes, staring out a window as he thinks. Thoughts are chasing themselves in his head, too fast for him to fully understand them.

"Quackity!" Schlatt snaps, "I'm gettin' real fuckin' sick of this attitude. Pay attention!"

"I am." Quackity frowns, turning to look at him. Schlatt just - seems so different than he was when Quackity left. Schlatt used to command his attention with barely a word, either fear or love forcing Quackity's eyes on him at all times. The glow has left, though. When Quackity looks at him, all he sees is a man, hungry for power. A man who's been using Quackity for days, now, to control his prisoners. Because Quackity is leverage for them - they care about him. Schlatt had said it himself.

Schlatt slept well, the night before. Quackity lay on a bed softer than anything he has slept on for the past few months, in arms that did not belong to the ones he wished for, in a room that made him ill to even think about, let alone lay in, and didn't sleep a wink.

Schlatt would have killed him, to hurt them, if George hadn't stopped him. Quackity isn't surprised that Schlatt would have killed him. He knows he's expendable, at the end of the day. He's Schlatt's secret weapon, willing to destroy himself so whatever Schlatt is planning succeeds. Quackity's just surprised that it worked. That after all he'd done, the pain he'd caused and only made worse in a moment of weakness, Sapnap had still touched him so gently, spoken so softly to him. That Karl had promised to come back for *him*, too.

Is it possible that Sapnap would have forgiven him? Is it possible that Sapnap would have been

angry and hurt, but that he wouldn't have punished Quackity? Or left him?

Would Sapnap have regretted Quackity, if Quackity had told him?

"*Quackity!*" Schlatt yells, loud enough that Quackity jumps and stumbles back, pressing himself up against the wall of Schlatt's office. "What is *wrong* with you today!?"

"Nothing." Quackity frowns, forces himself to straighten up, to stop cowering. "I just..."

"You're thinking about them." Schlatt narrows his eyes, the slitted pupils staring Quackity down.

"Who?"

"You know who." Schlatt slams his pen down, "Don't try to use that dumb bitch act with me, Quackity. You're thinking about those losers."

"They aren't losers." Quackity says without thinking.

"I'm sorry?" Schlatt stands up, "I think I misheard. Because if I'm on one side of a conflict and they're on the other, and I win, that makes them losers."

"They aren't." Quackity says, trying to make his voice stronger. "They aren't losers."

"So am I the loser, then?" Schlatt pats his own chest, movements bold and expressive. He's trying to scare Quackity with all the movement, trying to intimidate him, and it's working. Quackity fucking hates that it's working even when he knows that's what Schlatt is trying to do.

"No, Schlatt." He gives in, dropping his eyes.

"No, *what*?"

"No, sir." Quackity drops his voice, too.

"That's what I thought. So if I'm not a loser, then *they're* the fuckin' losers. I've got one caged up in my - fucking gods, what is that fuckin' thing called?"

"Oubliette," Quackity says, faintly, brain working on autopilot.

"Fucking *oubliette* - what am I, a fucking librarian? It's a fuckin' hole in the ground." Schlatt snorts, "Either way, no one fucking knows where he is except the people in this room and the dead guards who put 'em there. He's so far below the castle no one's gonna find him, I've got the prince ready for trial time tonight, I've got his useless godling trussed up like he's the main course at a family dinner and the last one has scurried off into the gutter where I found 'em. Remind me not to listen to Purpled anymore, by the way, that fuckin' recommendation *sucked*."

Quackity drops his hand to his pocket, carefully pulls out a cigarette with shaky fingers.

"They saved me." He admits to his shoes.

"Huh?" Schlatt scoffs, "Speak up."

"I said they saved me. Lots of times."

"Of course they did, you had them in the palm of your hand thinking you were some librarian's assistant."

“Before then, too.” Quackity twists the cigarette in his hands, worrying the crushed ends, “S-Sapnap. He saved me. During the coup, I ran into him and he hid me. I didn’t know it was him but he -”

“Okay, great.” Schlatt interrupts, “Cool. I’ll send him a fruit basket for making sure my assistant didn’t die during the coup. What the fuck does it *matter*, Q? They’re all dying tonight, and we’re movin’ up in the world. You’re about to rank higher than everyone else in the fuckin’ kingdom except *me*. ”

“I owe Sapnap.” Quackity makes himself look up, makes himself look at Schlatt, see the annoyance on his face and not let it send him into a panic. “I owe him. Y-you said you wouldn’t kill him.”

“This again?” Schlatt collapses back in his chair with a roll of his eyes, “Prime, what is this broken fuckin’ record thing you’ve come back with? I told you. You could keep him if he was *good*, but he *wasn’t*. Besides, you’re too attached to them. I don’t like it.”

“Why?” Quackity challenges. “Jealous?”

The room rings with silence. Schlatt turns his eyes to Quackity and Quackity holds his breath.

“Why, dollface?” Schlatt leans forward on his desk, staring. “Do I need to be?”

Quackity...Quackity lets the silence speak for itself. He crushes the cigarette in his palm.

“Well.” Schlatt sits back. “That’s interesting. Can’t say I didn’t expect it. You always did fall for whoever says a nice word your way.”

“They’re good people.” Quackity breathes in shakily. “They’re good. They just want to go somewhere else. They don’t want the throne. George doesn’t want to be king and XD just wants to be with him. Sapnap, too, they just want to be together and live somewhere simple. They aren’t a threat to you.”

“What, are you a master fuckin’ strategist, now? Who are you to tell me who is and isn’t a threat? I’ve been callin’ the shots here the *entire time*, sweetheart. Don’t go tryin’ to act all smart now. Your job is to get people out of my way, not *think*.”

“All your plans have gotten us is a stupid fucking chair no one can sit on and blood, Schlatt!” Quackity snaps back, raising his voice, “All you’ve gotten me is *this*,” he motions toward his eye, the scar he can barely look at in the mirror, that he pretends isn’t there even though people *stare* at him in ways they didn’t before, in pity or disgust or curiosity, “and - and my wings, you *took them* from me -”

“Oh my gods, here we go!” Schlatt throws his hands up, “You and your *wings*! When are you gonna let it *go*, honeybunch!? It wouldn’t have even fuckin’ happened if you’d just *done your job* -”

“You mutilated my wings because I couldn’t convince the strongest person in the continent to fall for your trap!” Quackity lets himself rage, lets the anger and the bitterness and the fear all come bubbling up. “*You did that!*”

“*You made* me.” Schlatt yells back, “*You made* me do that, sweetheart, why would I *want* to clip your wings!? You had to *learn* -”

“I didn’t!” Quackity screams over him, arms tight around himself, “I didn’t *make* you do any of

that! You *chose* to do it! You *chose* to hurt me because you couldn't hurt Techno! You *chose* to hurt me because *your* stupid plan failed and I was the only one *weak* enough for you to take your anger out on, *you* -”

Schlatt stands up so hard his chair flies back, slams into the wall and topples over.

Quackity goes silent, panting.

“Come here.” Schlatt crooks a finger, coming around his desk to lean against it.

Quackity shakes his head.

“Come *here*, Quackity.”

“No.”

His voice is small, rough still from the bruising, mouth dry and his heart isn’t pounding because of his shouting, not anymore. His hands tremble, arms still curled around himself. He’s braced and ready for what he knows will come, but still, he raises his head and stares Schlatt dead in the eye.

“Quackity,” Schlatt says, and Quackity cannot stop the shiver that shakes him then, at the timbre of Schlatt’s voice, the low growl of a predator, “You have one last fuckin’ chance before you cross a line that you won’t be able to come back from. *Come here.*”

“*No*, Schlatt.”

“You,” Schlatt says, and even after his denial, Quackity shrinks back as he steps closer, blood in the water between them, “think far too fucking highly of yourself, Quackity. You always have. Always thinkin’ you were so important. In-fucking-dispensable. And you know what? Maybe for a little while, you were.”

Schlatt is lightning fast when he’s sober. Quackity’s head slams into the wall, black shooting across his vision. His legs give out from under him and he crumples to the ground as Schlatt towers over him.

“You are *nothing*,” Schlatt seethes, “You just threw away your last fuckin’ chance to be something, you ungrateful fucking *bitch*.” His boot comes down, hard, on Quackity’s side, “You are so fucking lucky,” and again, “That I don’t,” and again, “have the time to punish you properly.”

He grabs a hand under Quackity’s chin, dragging his face up, even as he wheezes in pain.

“You are going to watch,” Schlatt says, eyes cold in fury, “As I kill the prince. As I kill his fucking annoying dog of a knight. And then, for good measure, I am going to find that traitorous fuck of a librarian, and I am going to kill him. Maybe *that* will remind you of your place here.”

As Schlatt shoves him back to the ground and grinds his boot into Quackity’s gut, Quackity closes his eyes tight and tries to pretend he’s somewhere else; a warm fire, laughter, marshmallows roasting, and far away from this place.

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

guess whose back to posting! (It's me, it's bramble :D) thank you all so much for all your lovely comments, in the last week, been having some irl stuff goin on and every single one of them has brightened my day and made it all bearable. so thank you thank you thank you :D

EDIT BECAUSE I AM AN IDIOT

[THIS INCREDIBLE FANART FROM KATT BEC???](#)
[AND THIS FROM THE WONDERFUL RUDY](#)

AHHHHHH??? i still can't believe there is fanart that blows me away that ppl like this enough to draw for it and especially all of our faviroute tired boy i love it i love it we love it! please give them loads of love theyre incredible artists!!!

cw for this chapter // implied abuse, implied intimate partner violence, implied general violence though it never gets overly graphic.

it's the real beginning of the end folks. hope you're ready :D

Jimmy and Chandler have been gone for a week and Chris for two when Purpled stops by the library with a proposition.

“I’m not saying take the job.” Purpled says, shrugging, “Honestly, Schlatt’s a piece of shit. But I heard you were looking for a job, and everyone else is gone, so...”

“Thanks for that,” Karl says cheerfully, “Nice to know I’m your fourth choice.”

“Seventh, actually.” Purpled corrects, “I couldn’t find Tareq. Or Frank. Or Jake.”

“Great.” Karl says and plucks the letter from Purpled’s hand, “Thanks, kid.”

“Don’t call me kid.” Purpled frowns and is still grumbling when Karl ushers him out of the library and closes up for the day. Technically, he still has a few hours that his sign says he’s open for, but Karl isn’t much one for following rules - even ones he sets himself.

He reads the letter. It’s just an outline, brief, a few lines. It’s looking for someone to go on babysitting duty. Karl could go on babysitting duty. That hullabaloo with Billiam’s crew finally died down and Karl is *bored*. He loves his library, but he’s read every book, looked at every map, memorized every interesting tale. And it doesn’t exactly rake in the cash. His wallet is looking a little lean since he’s had to go underground for the past year. He’s just barely got back to the city,

he's been kickin' it with Chris' family on their farm until Jimmy had given the okay to come back, but he's ready to dash again. Have some fun, find someone interesting for a few days, maybe.

He doesn't think too hard about it, just sends an acceptance to the address listed and waits. It's only the next day that a dour knight comes to collect him and bring him to meet his employer.

Karl is a talker. He's friendly, he's likable, he's curious. People *like* to talk to Karl. This guy does not like to talk to Karl, no matter how hard Karl tries. He doesn't even get a name, just a blank stare that finally shuts him down.

Karl wonders if the guy he's supposed to be watching is as grumpy. He hopes not. It'd be a real boring job, and Karl is mostly doing this for the *experience*. He's a quick talker but he's not usually spying on his own team.

He's brought to a house. It's a nice house; Karl's seen nicer but he's not *been* in nicer. At least, not through the front door. Inside the nice house is a nice office, where a horned man with slitted eyes is waiting behind a desk, pleasant smile in place.

Karl gets a bad feeling about him immediately. Still, he smiles back.

"Nice to meet you. Schlatt, right? Heard lots about ya', man. That thing with the election? Good job. Congrats on being president."

"Thanks, man." Schlatt stands, motions to a chair on the other side of the desk, "Sit. Can I get you anything? You a drinking man, Mr. Jacobs?"

"Nope." Karl says and plops into the chair.

"Can't relate." Schlatt jokes and motions to a crystal glass, half full of amber. "Nothin' beats a good vintage."

"Nothin' 'cept cold, hard cash!" Karl chirps, "Which is why I'm here!"

"Of course." Schlatt laughs, sitting down. "You accepted my job. Purpled talked you up."

Sure, he did. Karl smiles. Purpled thought Karl was an idiot. Purpled was just busy and couldn't say no to a job from the president so he pushed it onto his nearest associate. Whatever, Karl will take it.

"It's a simple one." Schlatt loses the smile. "I'm sending my best man on this job. He's chasing down some major players. You ever meet the runaway prince?"

"No." Karl shakes his head. He'd seen him from afar, but his jobs had never had such high-class victims.

"You've seen him before, though, right?"

"Yep."

"Perfect. I'm sending my guy to hunt the prince down. Get him in the right place at the right time. My problem is that Quackity, the birdbrain, can get a little...distracted. Especially when he goes undercover like this. I just need someone to keep an eye on him, make sure he isn't getting too deep. Easy-peasy. You think you can do that for me, Mr. Jacobs?"

"Sure." Karl shrugs, "That sounds right up my alley."

“You’ll be compensated, of course.” Schlatt pats his desk, “Well compensated.”

“I didn’t doubt it.” Karl waves the concern away. “I’m an easy guy, Schlatt. I just do what I’m told.”

Most of the time.

“I love easygoing types.” Schlatt claps, “One more thing. Try to keep your role quiet with Q. I don’t wanna stress him out, thinking I don’t trust him. As far as he’s concerned, you’re there to make his story a little more believable. If anything happens, just let me know so I can come pick him up but otherwise just back him.”

“Sure.” Karl shrugs. No skin off his nose if this Quackity guy knows he’s being watched or not.

He and Schlatt part ways with a handshake. He’s got two days to pack and close up his library, and he spends one of those days going over his maps of Kinoko and picking which books to bring along. He ends up with ones that will help him navigate; he’s got a feeling he’s going to need to know the landscape well, if Quackity’s job is to bring the prince close enough to the capital for Schlatt to snatch him.

When he and Quackity meet, Karl is barely paying attention when he comes back to Schlatt’s place and stands in the entry hall with his duffle of books and his bag of everything else - potions, rations, tools. He’s ready.

“Ah, Mr. Jacobs.” Schlatt welcomes him loudly, “Right on time. Let me introduce you to your partner.”

He motions and someone steps out of the shadows, cloaked in a simple cloak and leather armor.

“Yeah, hi,” Karl glances at him and then does a double-take.

Cute. That’s the first thought Karl has when he sees Quackity. He’s shorter than Karl, with dark hair hidden under a gray beanie. He’s got a scar that looks *badass* cutting across one eye, a serious expression on his face as he stands next to the president, looking tiny next to a ram hybrid like Schlatt. Karl is supposed to *watch* this guy? Karl can do that. Karl will have a great time doing that, actually.

Quackity looks him over briefly then returns his eyes to Schlatt. “You’re *sure* -”

“We’ve discussed this, sweetheart.” Schlatt drops a hand on Quackity’s shoulder. Quackity goes immediately quiet. Karl watches, brow raised, as Schlatt trails the hand to Quackity’s shoulder blade and pats him firmly on the back. “I trust you two. Don’t fail me.”

“We won’t, sir.” Quackity says, quiet, and steps closer to Karl, away from Schlatt’s hand.

Karl resists the urge to wrinkle his nose up at Schlatt. He knew his feelings were spot on; the guys a fuckin’ slime ball (no offense to slime-people).

“Whelp, better get goin’.” Karl says loudly, breaking the weird tension. “Places to be, princes to catch.”

“Right.” Schlatt smiles. “Good luck.”

Neither Quackity or Karl look back as they leave the house, but Karl feels Schlatt’s eyes on them until they turn the corner.

"He's kinda weird, huh?" He says casually, once they're alone.

"Don't." Quackity says tightly and shoves a book in his hands. That's the end of the conversation.

Karl doesn't know when he starts to think of Quackity less as a mark and more as an interesting person. Karl likes interesting people - some might say he likes them *too* much. Interesting people are always the ones that he can't resist. Maybe he isn't cut out for a babysitting job or, at least, not when the one he's supposed to be watching and reporting on is as contradictory as Quackity is.

He'd thought Quackity was cute, had fleeting thoughts about shooting his shot until he'd realized that Quackity really *was* dedicated to this job. Every night, dusk on the dot, Quackity would open his Schlatt-given enchanted book and pen a paragraph. Karl has no idea what he writes about, the first week of their journey together had been nothing but walking and strategizing. Quackity wanted to build an elaborate ruse around him being some sort of businessman partnering with Karl's library and he seemed really passionate about it when he brought it up. Karl thinks they should just stick to being two co-librarians on a trip to pick up from his suppliers. It's easy, it's simple, and when he uses this cover it usually means that he *can* stop by suppliers that happen to be around and talk business. Quackity is adamant and always ready to argue his case, though, and it quickly becomes their favorite pastime, making up elaborate backstories for themselves and each other.

The further they get from Kinoko, the more animated Quackity is, Karl notices. He also notices that Quackity flinches from sudden movements and he is always, always watching Karl out of the corner of his eyes, even when he seems calm. It's almost a reflex, Karl thinks, for Quackity to shift away when Karl steps closer, for him to leave space between them, a buffer. Karl finds himself distracted during their walks, wanting to say things just to make Quackity respond. The only topic he's found so far that gets Quackity properly going is their cover story but, just as his mannerisms grow more expressive with every mile between them and the city, so does his willingness to speak up. By the beginning of the second week, Quackity is arguing with Karl as they walk and it even sounds like he's having fun with it.

Karl only writes to Schlatt every three days - if that. There's nothing to report. Quackity is funny, and *loud* when he forgets to be quiet, and he's got a laugh that's so genuinely amused that it makes Karl laugh, too. Quackity soaks up praise like a sponge and likes when Karl tells stories about the stars even when he won't admit it. Karl doesn't think any of that is what Schlatt wants to know. Instead, he usually gives him a sentence or two - *Nothing new. All is normal.*

He keeps the good bits for himself - Quackity's laugh, the shy way he says *thanks* when Karl hands him a ration before taking his own, the way he curls up by the fire and looks soft in sleep but fierce and ready to fight when he's awake over everything from who has to put the fire out to which side of the path they walk on. He's so *strange*, Karl can't help but think fondly. He likes when Karl compliments him, but he's cutting when he tells him to shut up. He blushes so prettily, but he looks like he'd rather be stabbing himself in the foot than speak to Karl most of the time, even when he's obviously having fun. It's like the more he pretends he doesn't *like* Karl, the more Karl desperately wants him to admit it.

Karl doesn't know when he started thinking of Quackity as an interesting person - probably, it was the moment he saw him, scarred and shadowed at Schlatt's side, holding himself so small that Karl hadn't even realized how *expansive* he was until they were out of the city and he could really stretch his personality out. Schlatt was imposing and predatory and Quackity had been wilted in his big, obnoxious house in a way that was only apparent from how comfortable he slowly became with standing straight under the sun. He thinks, but he can't be sure. Karl does know when he

realizes that he wants Quackity, though. Wants him in a way that's, while not completely new to him, exceedingly rare.

It's a little over a week into their travels. They're sitting together by the fire, the usual foot of space between them. It's Quackity's turn to take the first watch and Karl is glad for it. He's honestly exhausted. The day has been long and hot and he doesn't handle heat well at all.

"I think it's about bedtime for me." He says, if only to fill the quiet that's fallen over their little camp. Quackity had been even less responsive than usual, perhaps picking up that not even Karl was interested in talking under the beaming sun. Quackity doesn't respond and Karl finds himself pouting, having hoped to garner at least some sort of attention after the last fifteen minutes of quiet. That's a record for him!

He turns to Quackity, another quip ready to fly, but catches his own tongue before he can speak. Quackity is awake, but he's swaying. His eyes are slowly lowering, fluttering back open, lowering again as he stares into the dancing flames. Quackity isn't used to traveling, not like Karl is, and that was obvious from the first day. Walking so far and for so long, it ties him out much faster than it does Karl and Karl had long grown used to adjusting his speed to match Quackity's; but Quackity bears exhaustion easier than Karl does. He needs at least five hours of sleep or he barely functions, and he hates waking up even more than usual. It seems like Quackity can sleep a grand total of two hours and be fully functioning, if a little quieter than Karl has grown used to, and wakes up on a dime. Karl has never actually *seen* Quackity fall asleep before - he always curls up tight so Karl can't see his face and he sleeps as tensely as he is awake, too.

All of that is to say that *this* is a sight. The day must have knocked him out, too, because Quackity starts to list to the side, breathing deep and steady as if he's only moments away from truly sleeping sitting up.

Karl...doesn't really think about it. He just inches closer, careful and slow so he doesn't ruin this, and slides into place at Quackity's side. Quackity's head finds his shoulder only seconds later, a weight somehow heavy and not. Karl hasn't been touched since he left the city - he's a touch-loving person but the only time he'd tried to touch Quackity before, he'd flinched so hard he'd landed on the ground and Karl had taken the hint.

Quackity along his side feels like a balm on a burn, scratching an itch for contact that Karl has been ignoring for days. What's more, he *feels* Quackity fall asleep on his shoulder. Feels his weight go lax, forehead lightly brushing his throat.

Karl, inexplicably, feels heat rush to his face. He wants to look down at Quackity's face but he's filled with a terror that he'll somehow wake Quackity up.

He'd been exhausted only two minutes ago but now energy zips and zaps through him from head to toe, making it all the harder to stay frozen. Quackity begins to snore - quiet, barely audible but *there*. He shifts closer, pressing their arms closer together. Karl's hands flex but he keeps them to himself, folds them tightly in his lap and stares at the fire and then into the trees.

There is something welling up in him, he realizes as he looks into the darkness and listens for sounds of approaching mobs. It's desire, to be sure, which is familiar enough. But it's also something - else. He likes that Quackity feels comfortable enough to fall asleep like this. He likes that, when he got closer, Quackity didn't immediately straighten up. He likes the way Quackity feels on his arm. He likes that he'd made Quackity laugh earlier that very day, and that Quackity had quietly pulled a ration out for him for dinner. He likes the teasing and joking they've been doing lately. He likes that he can flirt and Quackity just rolls his eyes or *blushes* a pretty pink.

Hm. Fuck. Karl would sigh, but it might dislodge his sleeping companion so he keeps it in. He'll be a wreck tomorrow if Quackity doesn't wake up for his shift but it's a price Karl finds himself willing to pay if only Quackity stays right where he is for a little bit longer.

If Karl's first thought of Quackity was *cute*, his first thought of Sapnap is *holy shit, he's cracked*.

They hadn't really *known* the group of mercs that ended up capturing the prince for them, but they'd been traveling together for a few days by the time he and Quackity split away to hide. The plan was pretty simple. The mercs would capture the prince, Karl and Quackity would jump out while the knight was distracted and help save him, they'd all become best friends, lead them back toward the capital somehow and *bam*. Karl got paid, maybe a date with Quackity after this was all over, and that was that.

That is...not what happens.

What happens is Karl is getting ready to give the signal to Quackity to jump out because he spots a man in the tree line - and then his signal falls away because the man fucking *murders* three people in less than thirty seconds. The fourth merc doesn't stand a chance. Karl grips Quackity's shoulder to hold him back when he starts forward, as if he could somehow save the last merc from the man's blade.

It's over in what feels like less than a minute.

"Holy shit." Karl says, "He's cracked."

Quackity just groans. "We're *fucked*."

"Yeah." Karl agrees, but he's not worried. He isn't sad to see those mercs go, even if it means they're out of a plan. They'd been loud and rude, and a couple had been particularly fond of antagonizing Karl in the boredom of traveling. If he'd still had his potions, he'd have quickly given them a reason to leave him alone but he'd had to sacrifice his bag of goods to keep him and Quackity safe. It was a good trade, in the end, because Quackity's been softer toward him ever since, but it's left him a bit on the helpless side. This knight doesn't seem like someone Karl would wanna be helpless around.

Oh, well. They'll figure something out.

As it stands, figuring something out just involves stumbling upon George in the forest at night. George does nearly all of the talking *for* them and suddenly they're in.

Sapnap is an interesting person, too, to Karl's surprise. Unlike Quackity, Karl knows the exact moment that he realizes it; that Sapnap's rough attitude was a farce.

They're picking their way through rock and uneven ground, Karl ever-slowing the group so Quackity doesn't feel the pressure of being at the back. He's noticed Sapnap's obvious slowing, too, over the last few hours - as he and Quackity continue to fall behind, Sapnap never gets any farther from them than he'd started and George stays between them, closer to Sapnap but not very far at all. George keeps looking back at them, worry in his eyes, but Sapnap hasn't glanced at them once.

"Stop flirting with me, you're going to fall." Quackity wipes sweat from his face, but he laughs when Karl flutters his eyes and says "Fall for you, I know."

Quackity pushes at him lightly but he lets Karl help him off the next jump and Karl can't ask for more. He won't admit it but Karl's starting to get tired, too. He wouldn't mind a break, and not just for Quackity.

His prayers are answered only a short time later. He watches Sapnap shield his eyes from the sun to take a look across the terrain and then plop onto the ground.

"Sorry," Sapnap slicks his hair back and props his boot up, "Stone in my boot. Give me a minute."

Quackity collapses as casually as he can against a stone with shade and Karl joins him, expecting to get only a minute or so before they're back to marching. Time drags on, though; every time Karl glances at Sapnap, he's shaking his boot out with great concentration, refusing to take his eyes off his task. George hovers nearby and he watches Sapnap, too, a smirk playing at his lips that flames Karl's suspicions.

Sapnap only puts his boot back on when Quackity's breathing has evened out and they've all had a chance to drink some water and snack - Karl and Quackity have hardtack that they split between the two of them and George accepts the piece they offer him, though Sapnap shakes his head.

"Let's go." he says without looking in their direction when the hardtack is gone and Quackity looks less like he's about to hurl. "We've still got a few hours to go."

Sapnap sets the pace again and it's noticeably slower than it was before their break. Karl can't help but watch Sapnap's back and think. Despite how hard he fought to not include the two of them, which, honestly, was understandable and Karl probably would have done worse to keep two dead-weights like them off their team - Sapnap was accommodating them. He was letting them drag him and George down without even a word about it. He was being *nice* to them.

Interesting. Sapnap, Karl realizes, is interesting.

That night, around the fire, Karl finds himself teasing. Sapnap has such a severity to him. A sort of heaviness that Karl has never had on his own shoulders. From the research Karl did before he joined with Quackity to leave Kinoko, he knows that there was a third member of Sapnap's little brotherhood once. Someone that Karl's sources said was with them but who Schlatt never bothered to mention and who Karl has seen hide nor hair from. The grief Sapnap wears like a shroud is so apparent that it sets Karl's teeth on edge, activates his natural instinct to distract until the atmosphere is a little lighter. Trust Karl to decide that he's interested in *two* men who sometimes suck all of the air out of the room through sheer somberness at the drop of a hat.

He wants to see what Sapnap looks like when he smiles, or relaxes. He wants to see behind the mask of surliness that Sapnap has on every waking moment. He wants to see more of Sapnap being flustered, like when Karl flirts and Sapnap obviously doesn't know what to do except sit and go pink in the face.

And then there's Quackity and his obvious crush. It's *cute*, it's so fucking cute Karl can't even bring himself to be jealous. Quackity can barely *look* at Sapnap half the time and he swallows his tongue the second Sapnap even speaks in his direction. Karl benefits from it more than anything - Quackity retreats into his arms when Sapnap flusters him and Karl gets to bask in both Quackity coming to him for security and comfort *and* watching Sapnap pretend like his eyes don't draw to Quackity (or Karl, he smugly thinks) when he thinks no one is looking.

Karl taps against Schlatt's book that night when it's his turn on watch. He's been writing less and less. Since they joined Sapnap and George, he's only sent four messages - each shorter than the last. His last just said 'no change', and it had felt like a lie as he wrote it.

There's Quackity and Sapnap, and whatever Karl feels might come of *that* in the coming weeks...and then there's the prince and his secret suitor, who Karl saw only a few nights ago when he'd followed George on one of his nightly excursions. There's a lot of interesting happenings with this little group that Karl has found himself involved with.

Jimmy won't be pleased if he comes back after a year away because he pissed off the wrong nobles and then he has to disappear again because he pisses off the new president.

Still...

Karl closes the book without writing anything and puts it at the bottom of his bag.

Karl doesn't get attached.

He's been accused of being a bit of a Casanova in the past, mostly by Chandler, who doesn't quite understand that not every fling Karl has is sexual. Sometimes they're platonic, sometimes romantic, sometimes antagonistic - but always they're intense. Always, they leave a mark on him. He just...likes to have fun. People are fun. As long as everyone is aware of what's going on and how it's going to end, he doesn't see an issue with firework relationships, burning big and bright and then going out almost immediately.

He's not bothered to keep track of the people he's known in the past, but each had carved a piece of him out and replaced it with a little bit of *them*, even if he can't remember who put what where. They've all left names and memories and changes behind when he'd left them or they'd left him. Some hurt, some healed, some were just - there. Not particularly moving, but all the more meaningful for it.

Karl watches Sapnap and Quackity sitting around the little fire, rain pouring just outside, George's gentle snoring from deeper in the cave, and he thinks about how it's starting to feel like the two of them are taking sandpaper to his heart and scraping it smooth so only they'll remain.

Sapnap is trying not to fall asleep, but he's still recovering from his idiotic romantic lead in the rain moment yesterday and he keeps drifting off. At the same time, Quackity is leaning close to him, doing much the same. Their heads keep bonking gently, waking them both up so they both sit straight again for a few seconds before it starts all over again.

Karl is...unbearably fond of them. It's a new feeling. Karl doesn't *feel* deeply. He appreciates love. He appreciates the warmth of someone's lips, the laughter of a good date, the sweet nerves of a new first. He appreciates it often, but so rarely does he truly feel it.

He feels it, watching them. He felt it, when Sapnap had left and Karl hadn't even thought, had just *followed*. He felt it, when he'd seen Sapnap start to fall and his only instinct was to *catch*, not to keep himself safe. He felt it when the three of them had set together around the fire and Karl had been allowed to hold them both at the same time. He'd thought curling up with Quackity at night would be the most amazing feeling in the world - and it *was*. It's just...being able to hold them both was a little bit *more* the most amazing feeling in the world. As someone who, previous to meeting these two, thought the most amazing feeling in the world was a really good book and a cup of Chris' special hot chocolate, there was a lot of rewiring that was going on in Karl's head.

Karl, watching Sapnap eventually give in and just rest his head on Quackity's and Quackity's eyes flutter closed as he, too, gives in to sleep, feels sparks of very real fear rattling his bones.

He's scared. Karl admits it, he's scared. Karl's not good with fear. It's the one emotion he struggles

with, the one that always pushes him to do stupid stuff. But he is. It's scary how deeply he's starting to fall for them. It's a scary thought, that he would happily wander the country, sleeping on the hard ground and never stepping foot in his beloved library again if it meant getting to do it with them.

Karl's never felt like this about anyone before, but he feels like this about both of them. That's a two hundred percent increase! A very quick two hundred percent increase! Zero to two hundred is a bit much, even for him.

He looks away from them to check the sky, but his eyes are dragged back like magnets soon enough, unable to resist taking in the sight. It makes him smile.

Ah. Whatever. There's nothing he can do about it now and no one is in the cave to judge him for staring.

Quackity's blood still stains his hands as he taps his pen against his book.

He knows Quackity hasn't touched his since before the mountain. It's in Karl's bag, shoved deep to the bottom. Karl's is a different enchantment. It doesn't drop a location like Quackity's does, just offers a two-way communication, a direct line to Schlatt.

Karl has a lot of fucking things he wants to say to Schlatt.

He wants to start with who the *fuck* Schlatt thinks he is, to touch an avian's wings the way he did. No wonder Quackity had been so tense when they'd met. No wonder he's gone so quiet. He wants to know if Schlatt really, truly understood what he was doing when he did what he did. When he *mutilated* Quackity's wings. Those wounds, they're not old, they're not even as old as the scar on Quackity's face. They didn't look magicked. They looked like they were still in the late stages of healing, like the skin hadn't even fully scarred over after closing. His fucking feathers, the scars, the dried blood that wasn't from the new wound -

Karl wants to be sick. He knows. He *knows*, instinctively, that it was Schlatt. Schlatt did that to Quackity. Karl's coming to realize that he isn't here just to make sure Quackity isn't distracted. Schlatt sent him to make sure Quackity didn't try to *run away*. Karl was supposed to inform Schlatt if Quackity got any fucking ideas about *leaving*. If Schlatt was willing to do that, to nearly murder Quackity for kicks or whatever reason he amputated parts of Quackity's *wings*, what else was he willing to do? What else had he *done*? What did Quackity see when he was hurt and his mind took him away?

If Schlatt was willing to do that to Quackity, who he called his best man, what would he do to George, his enemy? Or Sapnap, who was loyal to a fault? What, exactly, was he planning for the prince when Karl and Quackity brought him to his doorstep? And what about George's suitor, this new masked guy who floats and fuckin' teleports? Where does he fall into all of this?

Before meeting them, Karl wouldn't have cared. What happened to a prince had nothing to do with a part-time librarian like him. But this isn't just a prince, anymore. This is George, Karl's *friend*, who had taken a chance on him, ill-advised as it was. This isn't just the prince's knight. This is Sapnap. Sapnap, who fought Butler for Karl when he didn't have to, who stood up for him when he had no idea how true Billiam's words were. This isn't just some stooge who does Schlatt's dirty work. This is Quackity. Quackity, who Karl wasn't sure he could truly put into words even before seeing his wings, bloody and messy as they were.

Sapnap, who is asleep next to him, head in Karl's lap; Quackity, who is in Sapnap's arms and *also*

using Karl's lap as a pillow.

Karl, taking third watch, will be here to see the sunrise and they'll be with him.

He puts his pen to paper, ready to rip into Schlatt. He wants to call him every name he's ever read before, he wants to tell him that he'll never touch Quackity again, or George or Sapnap, not while Karl is alive to stop him. He wants to tell Schlatt exactly what a piece of *shit* he is.

Instead, he takes his pen off the paper and closes the book. Without any hesitation, he tosses the whole thing into the perfectly made fire in front of him. It hisses and spits, the enchantment trying desperately to fight against the flames, but eventually, it loses the battle. He watches as the enchantment breaks, as the binding begins to smoke and crack, as the paper curls into ash. He watches it burn for the next two hours, until the sun rises. And then he carefully slips out from under them and covers the remains with more logs and paces until the rage in his blood has dulled to a simmer. It's all he can do. He's made his decision.

While the cave is when Karl realizes he feels for them, real feelings that he doesn't think are going to just fade away when he leaves them behind, it's in the jungle that Karl realizes he's in love.

This, he thinks one night, staring up at the stars as they stare right back down, is not the kind of love they write stories about. It would be a boring, cliche story, he thinks, the traitor librarian falling in love with *both* of his marks. A fun story to laugh about around the fire, but ultimately without much meat to it. The climax is the reveal; he's fallen in love. There is no ending, just fact. Maybe, if things turn out okay, it could be a good one.

The jungle backdrops the tale of his fall.

Sapnap is so unlike most of the people Karl's met before. He's earnest and loyal, almost to the point that it might feel fake if Karl hadn't seen it in action, been a recipient of Sapnap's fierce care. When Sapnap smiles, his eyes close but don't quite crinkle. His instinct is never to move away when Karl comes too close, it's to casually brace himself. He catches Karl when he throws himself into his arms and lets Karl drape himself across his shoulders at will. He holds onto him when they embrace (which he allows often, for someone with such a grumpy face) like his only goal is to protect him.

Sapnap has never shied away from him, not in touch or in talk. He laughs when Karl jokes and flirts. Sometimes he does it *back*, and looks so proud when he manages to fluster one of them. When Karl rests his head on Sapnap's shoulder, he always feels the way Sapnap straightens out so his shoulders widen and Karl has more room. He's *vulnerable* and so *strong* all at once. When he breaks apart in their arms or he sleeps between them or he just - relaxes, shows them his tender underbelly, Karl is stabbed straight in the heart with *feelings*. Sapnap has such a big heart, raw from hurt and begging for them not to drop it.

And Quackity...Karl has tried to put words to Quackity before and he fails every time. Quackity is fragile but sharp, like he's been broken so often that his natural walls are inherently jagged. He's been hurt in ways Karl can't imagine, and he holds it in ways Sapnap doesn't. Karl doesn't doubt that Quackity has known darkness, has *done* dark things. But he also sees the way he smiles like the *sun*, sometimes, and during those moments, Karl thinks that this man was meant for the day.

Karl wants to curl around Quackity and never let him be hurt again. He has more scars than his wings and his eye, he hurts in ways he won't tell Sapnap or even Karl, but he never hesitates to open his arms when they need him. He never hesitates to touch Sapnap when he burns, even as Karl flinches from the heat. Even when he and Karl are fighting, he never walks away for long.

It's in the jungle that he watches them fall in love, too, and that is a beautiful thing.

If Sapnap holds Karl like he is going to protect him, he holds Quackity like he'll fight the world before he lets go. Sapnap touches Quackity quietly, gently, and his voice drops when he speaks to him in a way Karl can't help but wonder if either has picked up on. When Sapnap looks at Quackity, his eyes get all - sparkly. And Quackity looks at Sapnap like he sometimes thinks he isn't real, awe and surprise and a gentle sort of fondness.

Karl knows he loves them, and that they love him, and they love each other. He knows it.

He also knows what he has to do. If he wants this to work, if he wants this to be *real*, he knows he has to come clean. He's going to run headfirst into this with everything he has and just hope that it turns out okay. It's all he can do.

Karl isn't used to being the brave one. He's used to cutting and running, especially when things start to get intense like this. But for them, he wants to try. For them, he wants to be brave.

He isn't brave, when Quackity grips his fingers the same way a doomed man grips the edge of a cliff. Sapnap has settled himself behind Quackity, the wings spread wide and open. He's as nervous as Karl is, but he isn't the one that is watching Quackity's fear play out right in front of him, carefully analyzing the way that his face moves, breath hitching at the smallest movement. Karl is the one gently stroking circles into Quackity's hands as he bites back a muffled sob.

He presses a soft kiss to Quackity's knuckles once Sapnap finally starts the preen, "You're okay, baby, you're doing so good."

Softly, slowly, like falling snow, Karl watches the pain and the fear melt away, allowing the brightness of spring, of sunlight to shine through. Quackity is always beautiful, he thinks; beautiful when he is scared and thrown into his own memories, beautiful when he laughs, when he pokes and prods George into fond annoyance. Quackity is beautiful with his walls and without them, and he is beautiful as he lets his defenses down. Karl watches Quackity's face soften and slip into a sleepy, blissful haze, and he has never been more in love.

"You're so brave, baby," Karl whispers, just for Quackity, "So brave, so good for us."

Quackity sighs into the praise, his wings shifting imperceptibly so Sapnap can reach all of the hidden places, pressing up into his hand with an eagerness that is only just tempered by the exhaustion. It both blesses and breaks his heart in two when he realizes that he has never seen Quackity so relaxed.

He is loath to let go of Quackity's hand, but Sapnap asks, and Quackity says yes, and that is all Karl needs to know.

When he touches Quackity's wing, he does it reverently, with all the care of the rarest of books, the most precious of treasure. He touches Quackity with all the love he can give, hopes that Quackity can feel how much he loves him, how honoured he is to be allowed to do this. Even if Quackity never lets him touch his wings again, he would be content with this. Sweating his balls off in the middle of the deadliest forest known to man, he is content, because he can do this for Quackity.

Though he doesn't let it translate into his movements, he feels the burn of rage every time his fingertips brush against puckered scars. Karl doesn't get angry often, really only ever on behalf of his friends, but this rage is *more*. It's mixed with guilt, which only fuels it. Knowing that, however unknowingly, he aided the man who did this to Quackity...

Karl wants them to escape. He wants to go to the Badlands, and be with Sapnap and Quackity for real. He wants Quackity to be safe and *feel* safe. He wants Sapnap to finally feel secure enough to stop needing to be responsible for every single thing that goes on. He wants George to be free of the throne and all of the people chasing him and whatever pain he's hiding from all of them. He even wants XD to have a place, somewhere he can be comfortable and with George.

Karl hopes, as he slowly works burrs from Quackity's wings and they shake and quiver under his touch, that they make it to the Badlands, to wherever Sapnap is leading them, to some sort of place they can call home. He'd give up his library without a second thought, if he could just make sure that this - being together, the trust, the comfort, the love - was something he could have every day.

Okay, Karl thinks as he's dragged behind a cart, so dizzy he's shocked every time he takes his next step, barely conscious. Running headfirst with a lot of hope but very little planning didn't work out. He doesn't know exactly where he went wrong, what broke so badly that Quackity felt like he had no other option but this - he doesn't know if Sapnap can or would ever forgive either of them for *this* -

But he'll try again. As long as he can speak, he can make this work. As long as Quackity still looks at him when he says his name, as long as Sapnap is willing to hear him out, as long as George is at least awake and XD is at least breathing - Karl can do this. He can save them. He can fix this.

"Let me *go!*" Karl yanks at his wrists but the guard in question doesn't even glance at him. Karl's never really wandered the castle before, he has no idea where anything is at all, but if he had the chance he'd take it and just *run*. Hide. He'd find his way back to them and help them escape and -

And.

And what? Karl doesn't have a plan. He's had days of doing nothing but walking to think of a plan and all he's got so far is to call a family dinner. Jimmy is the planner. Karl's job is to *talk*. He thinks on the fly, he gets people to open up and reveal whatever he's trying to get them to reveal, he maybe gives them a fun run around town, and he disappears. Karl isn't the one that *plans*; he needs his friends. All he can hope is that they'll have some way to help.

He'll need more than just blind faith this time. Sapnap and Quackity and George and XD, they all need more from him than just flying by the seat of his pants. He has to think about this, really think about it, instead of just *hoping* that things work out. He doesn't have long, not long at all. No time for self-pity, no time for self-doubt.

Karl is led through the castle by his tied hands, spitting bitter curses at every knight and guard he passes, struggling uselessly. At some point, the guard stops by a door and knocks.

"For the librarian." he says over the sounds of Karl yelling every curse word he can remember from every book he's ever read in every language he's ever attempted to learn. The door opens, a hand reaches out slowly with a drawstring purse and drops it into the guard's free arm. It jingles.

"Your payment." The guard turns to Karl, finally, and glares. "Take this and go."

"You can take that purse and shove it straight up -"

"Ahem."

Karl twirls on his toes, hands coming up defensively against the new voice.

It's a man. He's wearing a green and white jacket and bucket hat, giant gray wings displayed proudly and arching over his shoulders to give him height and presence that he might not have otherwise had.

Phil. The advisor.

"I see you're escorting our guest from the grounds." Phil smiles pleasantly. It isn't pleasant.

The guard straightens up. "Sir."

"Allow me." Phil offers a hand, still smiling. "If you please."

"I don't think..." The guard starts, but Phil's smile widens and the guard drops Karl's lead into the open palm without another word, along with the string purse.

"Thanks, mate. Now run along. I think the rest of your order has been dismissed."

"Sir." The guard nods, then bows, and leaves in a hurry.

Karl looks at Phil, takes him in. He barely knows Phil, has seen him exactly once in person and read of his exploits from tens of legal documents and hearsays about the politics of countries now defunct and thriving both, but one thing is very clear. Despite his relaxed posture, this is a very, *very* dangerous man. Karl is under no illusions, Phil would beat his ass if he tried to fight him. He'd probably catch him if he ran. Karl will have to hope he has a moment of inattention and then break his hold on the lead and dash.

"Seems you've worn out your welcome, mate." Phil drops the smile, looking at Karl with something akin to pity. "Here. Let me get rid of that for you."

Despite his intimidating presence, his hands are gentle as they untie the ropes around his arms. Still, the fibers bite hard against the open wounds, sending fresh droplets of blood running down his arms. He's barely done wincing when the rope falls away, dropping to the ground in a pile.

"Why are you being nice to me? Schlatt said..." Karl asks, grimacing.

"I don't give a shit about Schlatt, mate. I'm here because of an old, old treaty and on a favor from my son. Come on, let's get you out of this fucking palace."

Karl wrinkles his nose up but doesn't otherwise respond. Something about it must be amusing, because Phil laughs, quiet and low, and begins to walk. Karl follows unwillingly.

They leave the castle proper soon and find themselves in the open grounds before Phil next speaks.

"I heard you, you know. When you were yelling earlier."

"Yeah?" Karl puffs up, "Well, I meant it. You'd better kill me, because I'm coming back and I'm saving my friends, no matter what Schlatt orders."

"I already told you, I don't give a shit about that horned fuck." Phil crosses his arms, looks Karl up and down with a critical gaze that's seen so many others, maybe in exactly the same position, "You look kinda scrawny to me, for a mercenary."

"Part-time mercenary." Karl snaps. "I'm a librarian. It's a respected profession."

"Sure," Phil says, lips slanting upwards into a half-grin, "And Techno's a potato farmer. You're in a lot of trouble, for a librarian."

"No shit." Karl says, turning to leave. He's stopped with a heavy hand on his shoulder. For a man who smiled incredibly easily, a single touch is enough to make Karl go entirely still, "Let me go."

"Patience, mate." Phil pats his shoulder, his expression serious, "I observe. I advise. I try to make sure that power is not corrupting anymore than it already has. Even still, with that, I am...bound by my position. An avian should never be bound; it goes against our very nature. Do you understand?"

Phil's eyes are a bright, icy blue. They seem to pierce right through Karl, who narrows his eyes.

"What are you saying?"

"I can't put my dogs in this race, mate." Phil sighs, and Karl throws his arms up into the air.

"I don't care about your dogs, I just want my friends!"

"Listen to me." Phil drops his voice. "I am bound. But my children are not."

"*Children?*"

"You've met them." Phil leans back, smiles, "My eldest are a little politically minded, in unfortunately opposite directions. The younger ones are just sort of feral. Can't help that much. Ranboo's my favorite, but don't tell any of them I've picked a favorite. Does it count as a favorite child if he isn't actually mine?"

"Those little beasts are *yours*?"

"It's complicated, but, in absence of any time to actually explain, yes," Phil says, "But it is absolutely not my fault that they're a little wild."

"A little - Tommy *stabbed my friend!*?"

"Well, in all fairness, apparently George tried to shoot him first. And Tommy assured me it was an accident. Unlike Schlatt, they actually *like* George."

"Oh, well, if it was an *accident*." Karl snarls, yanking himself out of Phil's grasp. "Look, whatever your kids want, that's on them. If they wanna have at Schlatt, be my guest. I just care about my friends."

"Do you, Karl Jacobs?" Phil draws himself up, shoulders back, wings flared. His eyes go bright, literally starting to *glow*, what the *fuck*.

Phil's presence seems to grow, unavoidable, until the small man in front of him somehow feels ten feet tall. His wings flare out and shadows gather at the edges of the feathers. Power radiates off him like heat from a fire.

"*Yes.*" Karl says. Now isn't the time to focus on the glowy-eyed avian. Vaguely, he wonders if Quackity's eyes glow as well.

"Good." The glow - stops. The power recedes. "Then be in your library by sunset. My boys will be stopping by and may bring a friend."

"...why?"

"To help, of course." Phil stops walking again and Karl realizes they've made it to a raised gate - not the main one that they came through, but a smaller one Karl wouldn't have noticed on his own. "And to apologize. From what I understand, Tommy owes the prince an apology and his knight a

thank you, at the very least.”

“W-what?”

“Go, Karl Jacobs.” Phil says, eyes sparkling, blue once more, “And here. For your troubles.”

He offers the purse, but Karl shoves it away, “I don’t want that. I don’t want *anything* from this fucking place. Just them.”

“You’re not a very good mercenary,” Phil grins, pocketing the purse, “Even for a part-timer.”

“There’s a reason it’s a hobby.” Karl says, slightly defensively, and Phil raises his hands.

“Hey, that was a compliment! Take care of yourself, mate.”

Karl nods at the man, taking one last look at the castle behind Phil, hoping beyond hope that he, somehow, by a stroke of luck, might see one of his friends.

There is no sight of them.

He leaves. But he’ll be back.

“Let me get this straight.” Jimmy says over his pasta, staring at Karl incredulously, “You were gone for a few months and came back in *love*? ”

Karl picks at his food. He knows that the others are probably going hungry right now, and it’s made his appetite disappear. His wrists are freshly cleaned and bandaged, Chris having spent a solid half hour just picking fiber out of the wounds before he could wrap them. He takes a bite but it tastes like ash.

“Yes.”

“With *both* your marks?” Chandler slurps up some noodles, “And now they’re locked up in the castle and you want to rescue them before they’re executed? ”

“Yeah, that about sums it up.” Karl nods. “So, you guys in? ”

“Well, duh.” Chris drops his fork to the table, “We need to meet these guys, if you like ‘em so much.”

“Great.” Karl pops more pasta in his mouth and chews mechanically. He swallows.

“It’s really funny that you’re pretending you aren’t dying right now.” Jimmy says seriously, “It’s okay. You can be stressed.”

“*I’m so stressed!*” Karl immediately shouts, “We should go, like, *right now!* I think Sapnap’s probably been separated out because he’s so strong and Quackity, oh, gods, *Quackity*, he’s in danger, and fuck if I know where they’d have put George or XD -”

“Okay, a little less stressed.” Chandler takes a drink.

Karl quiets down. His foot taps incessantly against the ground.

He’s missed them, his guild. They’re his family and he already feels - well, still awful. He feels fucking awful, but he has them and he can already see the gears behind Jimmy’s eyes turning and

he knows Chris and Chandler won't leave him hanging. Tareq and Frank and Jake are still out on jobs, but he has half his guild, three of his closest friends and he's promised the others that he'll come back for them. That word didn't mean much to him before, 'promise'. He meant it, though, and he still means it now.

"So, what do we know? What do we have to work with?" Chris looks between them all, "Anything helpful?"

"We know that they're all in the castle." Karl says, "We know they're in immediate danger. We don't have long at all. We know that Quackity is stuck with Schlatt, and Sapnap and George and XD are probably locked up."

"And we're sure," Chandler trails off, "Not to be an asshole, Karl, but you're *sure* Quackers is stuck with Shit? That he doesn't just...wanna be there?"

"*Quackity*." Karl stresses. "And..." he thinks about Quackity's tears, the fear, the humiliation, the pain. He doesn't know why Quackity called Schlatt. He doesn't know why he betrayed them. But he knows Quackity loves them, and he needs Karl's help. He knows that he promised Quackity that he'd protect him. "Yes. I'm sure."

"Okay." Jimmy says simply. "So we've got four people to save. From the castle. Which is heavily guarded currently because the president lives there. The newly elected president, who is also the one holding your bros and beaus hostage."

"Yes."

"Not the hardest thing we've ever done." Jimmy nods and takes another bite.

They strategize for a long time over empty plates and cups. Karl's library feels so cold and empty, now that he's missing pieces of himself. Usually, people *add* to him. Parts of him don't subtract when he loses them. This time, it feels like both halves of his heart are gone. He can't enjoy his books, he can't enjoy his home, he can't enjoy food or being with his family after so long away. He can't enjoy any of it, not while he knows that they're suffering.

Jimmy must notice his disinterest because he's the first one to call Karl out.

"I've never seen you like this." He says, peering over the books and maps they've slowly strewn across the table. "You don't usually...not to sound like an asshole, but you don't usually give a shit where your paramours end up once you've had your fill."

Karl winces.

"That's not true." He says, but it feels like a lie. The truth is that Jimmy is right - Karl had never really cared where his flings had ended up once they'd parted ways. He'd never checked up on one before, even. To Karl, once a book was closed, there was no need to open it up again or even give the option of a sequel. His time with the people in his past had taught him a lot, and he'd had fun. He'd felt happy and laughed, and he'd felt sad and cried. There'd been a boy in Snowchester, a girl in the Badlands, a couple in what remained of L'Manburg, tens more that he'd met on his journeys and during jobs that he'd given his time to and happily taken time from. And each one, whether feelings had been hurt or not, had started with the understanding that it wouldn't last. That Karl wouldn't be staying, no matter how they felt about him or he felt about them. He had a library and a guild to return to and his freedom was much too important to him to give up for any sort of relationship, romantic or platonic.

His guild understood that. He knew they did, because this wasn't the first time he'd disappeared for months only to be welcomed back and protected. When he'd abandoned Billiam's crew, Chris had sent him off to stay with his family in the country. The times he'd needed help before that, Jimmy had paid people off without question or Chandler had simply taken him along on one of his jobs until the heat had died down again. In return, Karl did the same for them - they had access to his library at all times, and he always had some sort of knowledge to give them if they had a question or needed a resource. They were his family, perhaps the only people in the world he could honestly say he loved, really and truly.

Or, they *had* been the only people in the world before this. Before Quackity's careful stare slowly grew warm and comfortable and trusting. Before Sapnap's guard, so high, lowered and Karl got to see him smile. Karl doesn't want to close this book. He wants a series with them, a neverending chronicle of their life together. He wants to write new chapters with them and know that, no matter what happens, the ending will be a happy one, when it one day comes. He doesn't care if this love is one they write stories about, it's the one he wants to write *his* story about.

"It's a little true." Chandler says.

"Okay," Karl nods. "It's a lot true."

"I just wanna make sure that we're not about to go rescue some guys and then they're gonna think it's more than it is and then we're gonna have to kill those same guys, you know?" Jimmy scratches his cheek thoughtfully, "That'd suck. I'm glad you're in love with them but you can be a little...gone with the wind."

Karl twists his hands together nervously. "I know. I know I can be. But I've never loved anyone like this before. It's like...it's just a fact. The capital of the Badlands is Pandora, you need blaze powder to brew a potion, I want to spend the rest of my life with Sapnap and Quackity. It's like that. They can't think that it's more than it is - it's exactly what they'll think it is. I want to rescue them, because I want to keep them safe. I want to - run away, if we have to. Live somewhere where they won't ever have to see that fucking castle or that *bastard* again."

"But your library?" Chris frowns, "Runnin' away is all well 'n' good, but you can't exactly strap this place to your back. You'll have to come back, or move it."

Karl looks up and around. His library, the only place he's ever really thought of as *home*. He still loves it, but the books are dull to him now. The warm light of his torches cast familiar shadows, but they bring no comfort.

"They're just books." he finally says and he sees their shocked faces but he can't help how he feels. "It's just...just a place. If I needed to burn every one, page by page, to get them back, I'd do it in a heartbeat."

"Damn." Jimmy turns the page of the tome in front of him. "Luckily, you don't need to do that. Probably."

"Probably." Karl smiles, the heavy atmosphere making him feel awkward. "Sorry. I probably could have just said 'no, they won't be weird about it' instead of being weird about it."

"Maybe." Jimmy smirks at him, all teasing, "But it's nice to see you this way, too. Our Karl caught the love bug and it's terminal."

"I sure hope it isn't." Chandler flops back in his chair, "I hate cleaning this place on my own. I always forget to dust all the places you know about."

“I’ll make sure to leave a thorough cleaning manual before I ditch.” Karl promises with a slow grin. Chandler just sighs forlornly, as if already imagining all the dusting in his future.

“Okay.” Jimmy straightens up from his relaxed slouch, “If you want this, then we’ll do it. That’s what a guild is for.”

“That’s what *family* is for.” Chris corrects and pulls Jimmy’s book out of his hands to flip it for him, “That’s upside down, numbskull.”

“Oh, thanks.” Jimmy flips the page without reading it.

Somehow, Karl is assured that this will work. They’ll help him rescue his friends and then - and then, who knows. But at least they won’t be locked up anymore, and that is enough for him.

The knock comes just after sunset.

“Did you invite someone to family dinner?” Chris asks, head buried in castle schematics. Where did Karl get them? No idea, but he has ‘em.

“No.” Karl stands up. “But I think my address got leaked.”

He peeks through the front window before he actually opens the door, but all he sees is a big huddle of shadows. Someone whose face he can’t discern waves at him.

With mounting apprehension, he opens his door.

“Yo.” Technoblade says and lifts a hand. From behind his back, Tubbo pops out on one side and Tommy on the other.

“Heard you’re plannin’ a jailbreak,” Tommy says.

“We want in.” Tubbo says.

“Not true.” Wilbur shoves through all three of them, “Phil said you needed assistance.”

“No, Phil said we needed to make up for the fact that we ambushed them in Badlands territory before Sapnap tells his dad and his dad starts a war.” Ranboo intones from out of sight.

“It was *not* Badlands territory,” Wilbur starts hotly, with the voice that echoes an argument long debated.

“It was Badlands territory.” Four voices chorus back.

“Come in.” Karl steps aside and motions. “Please don’t break anything, Mr. Technoblade, sir.”

“I’ll try.” Technoblade nods and ducks under the door frame to walk in. Karl feels lucky that his ceiling is so tall, because Technoblade rivals XD in height when he’s floating.

Wilbur and his brothers make their way through, leaving only a woman that had been hiding behind the lot of them in the doorway. Karl doesn’t recognize her but he motions her in with a sigh and she smiles awkwardly and follows so he can shut the door on the night.

“*More* new friends, Karl?”

“Not friends.” Karl says firmly. “Assholes who *stab* my friends, actually.”

"Sorry 'bout that, man." Tommy winces. To his credit, he does seem genuinely apologetic. "It really was an accident. Dream never let me get away with moves like that!"

"I'm not sorry." Tubbo shrugs, "Sapnap dodged me pretty good."

"Dream did electrocute my brother." Wilbur points out. "That masked fuck is Dream, isn't it? He's been hiding but we figured it out."

"I know I'm small," Karl looks at him seriously, "But I will tackle you right now and you won't get back up without help."

"Noted." Wilbur mimes zipping his lips, even as a small smile tugs at them.

"Not that I'm one to get in the way of content," Technoblade drops into Karl's chair. It creaks under his weight. "But Phil said you had something planned for tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?" Jimmy peers closer, looking especially curious. "What's tomorrow?"

"Wait, wait, wait," Karl holds up a hand, "Who is this? Do you gremlins have a sister?"

"No, this is *Niki*." Tommy grumbles, "She isn't our sister, she's our friend!"

"Hello." Niki says, voice soft and gentle. "I'm here on behalf of the palace guards loyal to the prince."

"Loyal to George?" Karl narrows his eyes, "Where the hell were they when we were carted in?"

"We're *loyal*, not stupid." Niki says primly, "And we're outnumbered on our own. Phil said you guys might be forming a concrete plan here. Punz heard Sapnap has been locked away somewhere and he and Sam were close to going to search on their own before Phil told us about you."

"Punz?" Karl thinks hard, through the haze of panic from that mad-dash through the mountain town - Quackity's warm weight on his back, Sapnap's burning hand in his, George's orders, XD popping into existence in front of him - "That - he was one of the guards. In town. He tried to *kidnap* George!"

"We did not!" Niki crosses her arms, "Prince George needed to return. Schlatt is power-mad, we needed him to gather support to lead a revolution!"

"He didn't *want* to lead a revolution!" Karl says hotly, "He just wanted to go away with Sapnap! Don't you guys get what the throne took from him? Have your own damn revolutions, leave him out of it!"

"He's the prince." Wilbur sighs, "He doesn't get to run away."

"Because you fuckers wouldn't let him!" Karl smacks his hand on the table, "All of this is because of your damn revolution, Wilbur. Sapnap told me you were involved in killing George's parents, and you -" Karl glares at Niki and then Tommy and Tubbo, Techno and Ranboo, "You chased him down like he was a pot of fucking gold. You wanted the royals gone? They were *gone*. You all are the ones that couldn't function without him. Who *cares* if no one can sit on the throne? Empty the damn castle and use the town courthouse!"

The room goes quiet.

"Told you." Techno says under his breath.

“No,” Karl points at him, “I’ve heard of you, Technoblade. You don’t get to talk up fighting tyranny and then help *keep it in place* by hunting down a man who wants nothing to do with a government.”

Technoblade makes a face but doesn’t argue.

“Look.” Karl looks around at the group, “Thanks for coming. Maybe having you will make this easier. But I’m telling you right now - I’m not trying to save my friends because I want to defeat the throne. I’m saving my friends so we can run away. If you’re cool with that, with *leaving George alone* as a prince - then good. But if you’re only here so you can continue to use *any* of them to help do your dirty work - fuck off. Get out of my damn library.”

The room goes quiet for a long few seconds.

“You’re right.” Niki admits. “You’re right. There are many guards still loyal to the prince because he is the prince. Some of us are loyal because he was...he *is* our friend. I grew up with George.” She presses a hand over her chest. “Punz and Sam, Ponk...so many of us, we trained with Sapnap and Dream, we swore ourselves to George and Kinoko. Maybe we follow Schlatt’s orders, for now, but only to survive. Only until we can return dignity to our nation. I know you don’t trust me. But if you’re trying to save our prince...no, our friends. If you’re trying to save our friends, you’ve got us. That’s why I’m here.”

“Us, too.” Tubbo pops in, “I promise. We’re here to help our friends. We like to fight ‘n’ all but we don’t want ‘em *dead*.”

Karl holds his breath and thinks. He doesn’t have much choice, really. The last few hours have proven that he and his guild might have trouble on their own. And Niki seems believable, more so than the kid that went after Sapnap with an axe and a mad grin.

“Fine.” Karl agrees. “You can help.”

“Gee, thanks,” Wilbur says with sarcasm, “We appreciate it.”

“Okay, now what’s all this about tomorrow?” Jimmy cuts in, voice curious and friendly. Karl knows the tone and feels the support coming from his friends. He might be in over his head, but at least he has the three of them on his side in all this.

“Phil didn’t tell you?” Tommy speaks up, face serious, “Schlatt’s gonna put Prince Gogy on trial.”

“They’ve got the court all set up,” Ranboo nods, “They called in all the judges and everything.”

“It’ll be a sham trial.” Wilbur sits on the table, crossing his feet at the ankle, “They’ll put him up on trial, accuse him of crimes, find him guilty, execute him right then and there.”

“Hardly fair.” Chandler frowns.

“That’s the government for you.” Techno shrugs. “Whole thing’s a sham.”

“It isn’t.” Wilbur says with annoyance. “This is corruption at play, not government.”

“Don’t start, you two, or I’ll call Phil.” Tommy interrupts. “Focus. We’re saving Prince Gogy! And Dream and Sapnap.”

“And Quackity.” Karl crosses his arms. “We’re saving all of them.”

Wilbur and Niki both look at him in surprise. Wilbur is the one to speak, but his question is echoed in Niki's face.

"You're saving Quackity?"

"Big Q?" Tubbo tilts his head curiously, "Didn't he sell you guys out? He's back at Schlatt's heels now. We saw him when we came to check in with Phil."

"Yes, we're saving Quackity. He's in trouble."

Wilbur smiles, shark smelling blood. "Oh, he got you good."

Karl clenches his fists. "Do you have something you want to say?"

"No." Wilbur shrugs and turns away. Almost immediately he turns back around, "Actually, yeah."

"Please, go ahead." Karl motions, "The floor is yours."

"Gods, don't tell him that, those are his favorite words," Tommy groans but Wilbur sweeps to front and center, smiling.

"Don't you *know*, Mr. Jacobs?" He starts, grinning like a cat that just got the creeper, "Who Quackity is?"

"Yes, I know."

"Oh, so you know he was almost queen?"

Karl did...Karl did not know that. He takes a hesitant step backward.

"Excuse me?"

"Oh, yes. You may recall the deposed monarch, Eret. Quackity was their fiance, for a bit. Straight through the coup, even! Then Schlatt stopped backing Eret and," Wilbur snaps, canting forward as he waves his hands about, gesticulating wildly, "Like that, he was gone. Abandoned them to the throne's madness."

"Is there a point?"

"And then," Wilbur motions to Techno, who just rolls his eyes, "My dearest brother was the target. Schlatt sent your darling sniffing around *him* for a while there. It didn't work, of course."

"Nothin' against him," Techno says, with polite disinterest. "I'm just married to my blade, s'all."

"None of that's to mention all the dirty work he did during the *campaign*." Wilbur says, words like shattered glass, "The man's practically Schlatt's right hand. What Schlatt didn't want to do, Quackity did. You honestly think he, what, was your friend?" Wilbur's eyes sharpen, "Or was it more? Did he convince you that he loved you, like with Eret?"

Karl glares at him, arms folded over his chest. "Are you done?"

"Oh, he did." Wilbur looks disappointed. "Boring. I thought you'd have seen through it, after he handed you over."

"Wil," Tubbo, of all people, speaks up, "Wilbur, you know that's not fair. You know what he did for me, with Schlatt. And for you and Tommy."

For a second, a flicker of *something* sparks in Wilbur's eyes. It recedes a moment later, but with it so does the politician's countenance, the bright light of a winning argument. Instead, he just looks tired, and Karl doesn't miss the way his eyes flick over Tommy, who is fixing him with the same hard look.

"I'm with Karl," Tommy says, and Karl blinks in surprise, "You're being a dick, Wil. And Big Q, yeah, he's fucked up but he's helped too. And he was a friend."

"On Schlatt's orders -" Wilbur protests, but the argument is weak.

"Still a friend," Tubbo insists, and the argument is dead at Wilbur's feet. Ranboo places a hand on Tubbo's shoulder and adds, "You don't give up on a friend."

Karl turns away from Wilbur, finding a welcome distraction from the boiling in his blood in Technoblade. "You said you went to the castle? What did you see? Do you know where they are?"

"I didn't go to the castle. Niki would know better than me."

"Yes." Niki nods, "There's someone in the dungeons. One of the kitchen maids heard it from a maid scrubbing out the floors when they passed by. And the stablehands told the cook that he saw two guys getting carried kicking and screaming toward Schlatt's quarters. If what Punz heard was true and Sapnap's in the dungeons somewhere, then I'll bet he's keeping Dream and George there so no one else sees 'em."

"That's good intel." Karl nods, not bothering to confirm or deny about Dream. If they want to assume that XD *is* their third missing friend, then Karl won't correct them. They're half right, after all. "Did we hear anything else? About, I dunno, plans?"

"The trial's tomorrow evening," Ranboo speaks up, "Probably execution straight after. He'll kill the prince and then his knights."

"Anything else?" Karl checks again, "We got it all out in the open?"

"I think that's everything." Tommy nods.

"Good, I didn't wanna do this before you said everything."

Karl marches up to Wilbur, who mostly just looks confused until he sees Karl winding back. He manages to say "Oh, man, this is gonna hurt," before Karl punches him right in the eye.

Wilbur's entire family burst into laughter. Techno bangs on the table, sending the plates stacked in the corner jumping with each slam of his fist, and Tommy falls over as he points at Wilbur, sprawled out across the floor. Niki lurches forward but then settles back on her heels, conflict in the way she bites her lip but she doesn't move forward to help just yet.

"Get *fucked*, Wilbur!" Tubbo howls, "Haha, did you see his feet lift off the ground!?"

"Fuck me." Wilbur blinks up at Karl as Karl shakes out his fist. "Bit excessive, don't you think?"

"Shut up." Karl snaps back. "All that stupid fucking speech did was tell me that you were in that fucking castle with him. You *saw* what Schlatt was doing to him, don't fucking pretend you didn't see it. You all *saw*."

Wilbur has nothing to say to that.

“Exactly.” Karl wipes his hands off on his pants. “Get up. We need to get a plan together. We don’t have a lot of time.”

“Damn.” Tommy waits until Karl’s stepped back to scurry to Wilbur’s side and help him sit up, “You deserved that one, Wil.”

“Shut up, Tommy.” Wilbur grumbles but he doesn’t refute it.

They’re up half the night hammering out a rough plan. Between them, there aren’t many options but Niki swears on her life that most of Schlatt’s men are sick of him. He’s been mistreating nearly his entire staff since Quackity wasn’t around to act as buffer and official feather-de-ruffler. The guards he’d inherited from the royals are sick of holding their tongues and want the rightful heir back, especially the ones who saw George at the mountain town alongside Sapnap; the guards Schlatt hired are only as loyal as the gold he spends on them. The servants avoid him. Phil has managed to hold him off from doing anything truly heinous to the laws of the kingdom, but things are getting dicey.

None of that will mean anything if Schlatt actually takes the throne, but he can’t do that, for some reason, until George is gone. Karl keeps his mouth shut about the reason why.

They settle on a rough outline of a plan. It’s all they have time for, but Karl has faith. He thinks they can do it. He knows if he just gets a sword in Sapnap’s hand and gives him plenty of space, he’ll be able to do miracles and he’s *seen* Technoblade fight. If he can wake XD up, even better.

As for Quackity...

“Leave him to me.” Karl shuts down that line of conversation. “I’ll get him. We’ll free Sapnap and meet you guys at the courthouse.”

“That’s a lot of faith to put in a traitor.” Technoblade is the only one to offer any sort of protest, disinterested as it sounds. Probably because he’s the only one unafraid of Karl throwing another haymaker.

“I was a traitor, too, you know.” Karl says with irritation. “Mind your side of the plan. I’ll mind mine. Okay?”

He looks around the table and meets each of their eyes. One by one, they all nod.

Everyone leaves in the early hours of the morning to get some rest before the attack, except Ranboo, who leaves to update Phil on the plan, and Niki, who will begin spreading word to the guards still loyal to George.

Karl sleeps, but only barely. It’s been years since he’s not had his cloak to turn to. The enchantment on it was his first, one he’d worked hard on, grinding experience points by working with coal and redstone until he had enough mana saved up to enchant the entire garment. He hopes, half-heartedly, that it ends up in a good home, whoever took it.

In the morning, he meets his friends in the library again. Jimmy has nearly all of the invis potions from the stores Karl keeps at his house, along with a few others, and Chandler and Chris are standing to either side of him, looking worried. None of Karl’s guild will be joining them this evening - instead, the three of them will be calling in the favors they have around town, sending backup to beef up the numbers siding with Niki and Technoblade in the form of plainclothes mercs who will hide amongst the townspeople coming to watch the trial until Technoblade gives the word. They’ll also be preparing a way for Karl and his friends to escape, if they have to run. Karl

hopes it doesn't come to that, but he wants to be prepared. He'll run to any end of the earth he has to, for them.

"Just came to wish you good luck, brother." Chris clasps his shoulder tight. "Be careful, okay? Keep your head on straight."

"Yeah," Chandler echos, "Don't let yourself get distracted. You're in a viper's pit."

"Goin' to kiss one of the head vipers." Jimmy reminds him, but he's grinning. "I'm happy for you, Karl. Really. I can't wait to meet them."

"I can't wait, either." Karl accepts the potion and the well-wishes. "You'll love them, seriously. They're...they're somethin' special, guys."

"They'd better be." Jimmy pulls a serious face and it makes Karl cackle, a little bit hysterical. "They only last ten minutes, remember."

"I remember. I brewed them, Jimmy."

"Shut up. Let me worry about you." Jimmy ruffles his hair, "Running away, falling in love, getting kidnapped. Invite us next time, for Prime's sake."

"Hopefully, there won't be a next time." Karl grins back and then makes his goodbye and slips out the door.

His journey back to the castle is a stressful one. He can't stop thinking about what could go wrong. He needs to find Quackity, needs to get him alone, needs to convince him to leave and leave for good. He needs to find Sapnap, needs to break him out of the dungeons, needs to get him a good sword and then get him all the way to the courthouse in time for the trial.

A lot is riding on Karl's shoulders. A lot of pressure, a lot of things that could go wrong.

It's a thirty-minute walk, and every minute of it finds Karl praying to every deity he's read about. It brings his thoughts to the story he told in the cave, what feels like a lifetime ago.

He deserves to escape the shadow, Quackity had said. *He deserves to escape*.

Karl thinks about that story as he pops his first potion. It tingles, feels like ants under his skin while it takes effect, and then the ants settle and he can't even see himself.

Time to get looking. He slips through the gate Phil had shown him the day before and starts his search.

Between four invises and opening nearly every door he comes across in the castle, he's exhausted. He's almost out of potions, too - he's keeping three in reserve for when they all make their escape and only has three left after this one wears off.

He has no idea where Quackity might be. He's just - wandering, hoping for the best, but the castle is massive and winding and Quackity is just one person. He could be *anywhere*.

It's sheer luck, in the end, that Karl finds Phil, and that he's alone. He's pouring over maps, parchment and charcoal spread across a table as he sketches in wide, sweeping arcs in an off-shoot room down a random corridor.

"Phil." he says, once he's sure it is him and he is alone.

Phil jumps and turns, looking around wildly, hand pressed to his heart “Oh, what the *fuck*? ”

“Phil, it’s me.” Karl hesitates, “Karl.”

“Oh, Karl.” Phil blinks, looking in his general direction. “Hullo.”

“Yeah, hi.” Karl waves his hands impatiently, before remembering that Phil can’t see him, “I’m looking for Quackity. Do you know where he is?”

“Quackity?” Phil hesitates. “Well, yes, I’ve heard rumors but...”

“Just tell me where he is, Phil.”

Phil shrugs slowly, “If you’re sure. He and Schlatt, I’ve been told, got into a bit of a...scuffle. Earlier. He’s been sent to Schlatt’s quarters for a time out.”

“*Scuffle*? Is he okay!?”

“I haven’t seen him,” Phil says in apology. “He walked there on his own, though, for what it’s worth.”

“Where, exactly, are Schlatt’s quarters?” Karl demands, panic filling him. Gods. Gods, what if Schlatt had hurt him? He must be terrified.

“In the west tower.” Phil points down the way Karl came, “Just follow the left wall. Only take lefts, until you reach the gardens, and then go straight through. The west tower is the highest of the three towers.”

“Are there guards?”

“One.” Phil says, “At the entrance. But he patrols the gardens, too. You should be able to slip inside.”

“Thank you.” Karl says sincerely and then slips away to follow Phil’s directions.

True to Phil’s word, he finds the west tower just as the guard is leaving to patrol the gardens. The door is locked, but this is finally a skill that *Karl* has and he’s inside and shutting the door without much trouble at all.

The tower is silent. He follows the stairs up until he reaches another door and another lock that he picks with ease. His invis wears off just as he’s coming through the second door, so he carefully and quietly closes it before he starts to look around. He hopes no one but Quackity is here. He’s got his daggers but he’d prefer not to kill. He will, for them, but he wants that to be his last option.

“Quackity..?” He breathes out as he goes room to room and sees nothing. He searches a kitchen, a living room, a sitting room, a *music room*, a large bathroom with a sunken bath, with no sign of who he’s longing to lay eyes on.

He searches until he reaches a final door, another locked door in his way.

He presses his ear to the door.

He hears breathing. It’s short and hitched, but the pattern is familiar, one he recognizes from, first, Quackity and then Sapnap.

In for seven, out for eleven.

“Quackity.” he repeats, louder, and picks the lock so quickly that he nearly snaps his pick in his haste.

Karl finds Quackity in the dark, curtains drawn across the windows and only a single candle on the desk to light the room.

“Baby.” He breathes when he finally opens the door and sees him. “Fuck. You’re okay.”

“Karl?” Quackity blinks at him. Karl’s never been so relieved to see his face before, even drawn and pale, teary and bruised as it is now. In the light of the candle, Karl can see the perfect ring of bruises around his throat. He has new marks, one eye black and his lip split. He’s hunched over, arm around his waist. Karl’s colorful cloak is draped around his shoulders. Karl feels sick at the sight of all the bruises, but it’s quickly drowned out with the relief rushing through him.

“I found you.” Karl says and collapses right there in the doorway.

“Karl?” Quackity blinks at him, eyes tired and red-rimmed. “What...how did you...?”

“Phil.” Karl explains, slowly crawling into the room. Quackity is on the floor, pressed into the corner of the room. He flinches when Karl gets close and Karl freezes, sitting back immediately. “Phil told me where you were. How to get here. I told you I’d come back for you.”

“You’re not supposed to be here.” Quackity says shakily, “This is Schlatt’s place. The entire castle is Schlatt’s. He’ll kill you, Karl. He’s going to kill you to punish me, you have to run.”

“I’m not running.” Karl says softly. “Especially not without you.”

“Karl, I *can’t*.” Quackity shakes his head. “I’m stuck here. I’m *stuck* here. You can’t help me.”

“Don’t say that.” Karl argues, except it comes out as a sob. He’s crying. He’s tried so hard not to cry, not since that horrible day when he had to watch Schlatt nearly murder Quackity right there in broad daylight while all of those guards just *watched*. He’s tried to stay strong for him, for Sapnap, because he knew that, of all of them, he was suffering least. He’s tried so hard, but he’s finally found Quackity again and he’s alive. The relief is overwhelming. He tries to speak through the tears and finds that he’s choking on them. “Quackity, c-can I hug you? Please, baby?”

“How can you still call me that?” Quackity blinks rapidly, eyes wet, “How can you want to hug me? After what I did?”

“I love you.” Karl sniffles. “I love you, that’s how.”

Quackity shakes his head slowly. “You’re...”

“Can I hold you?”

“...yeah.”

Karl flings himself into Quackity’s surprised arms, pulling his smaller body into his and holding him as tight as he dares. “You’re okay.” He sobs into Quackity’s hair, the familiar beanie pressed to his cheek, “You’re okay. Prime, I thought something - I thought something had happened. I thought he’d taken you away because I searched everywhere and couldn’t *find* you. I thought he’d hurt you again.”

“Hurt me?” Quackity pushes away enough to look at Karl. His eyes are dull behind the tears he hasn’t shed, yet. “What does it matter if he hurts me, Karl? After what I did? How can you stand to

look at me? How can you, when Sapnap is - when I -"

"Shh," Karl presses their foreheads together. "Shh, don't talk about it. Don't. Focus on being right here with me, okay?"

"Okay." Quackity says, voice breaking. Karl curls onto the hard ground, practically yanking Quackity into his lap so he can hold him as close as possible, and Quackity lets him. They sit, silent in the dark, their breathing matching until one of them starts to cry, hitching little sobs that the other eventually echoes before they both smooth out for a time, only to repeat over and over.

"Do you remember the first story I told?" Karl asks eventually, voice rough from tears.

"About the shadow." Quackity nods. "I remember."

"It wasn't about the shadow, baby." Karl rubs a firm hand up and down his spine, only just hard enough for him to feel it, careful of his wings, "No, it was about the child. The one made of love."

"I remember."

"I thought of an ending."

"Really?" Quackity sniffles, pressing his nose to Karl's neck. "What is it?"

"The child of love, he takes the shadow up on his offer." Karl strokes through his hair, gentle, kind. "He does. He takes his revenge. He hurts people. Innocent people, guilty people. He just - he hurts so much, that child of love, and all he can do is listen to the shadow and lash out. He's made into a weapon, a child no more, and it's scary and painful, but he doesn't know what else to do, what else to be good at."

"Oh." Quackity says, breaking again. Karl lets him cry, shhing him gently until he's calmed down again.

"But then..." he sighs, "But then, he meets someone. Another spirit, one that came after all of the pain. One that isn't as touched by the war. That ran away, because he valued his freedom more than he valued someone else's war. The spirit of freedom."

"That must be nice." Quackity breathes, "Freedom."

"It's so nice." Karl nods, "Lonely, though. So lonely. The spirit is lonely, see? Because he has freedom, but no one to share it with, until he meets the child of love. And they don't get on at first, not at all. They're enemies, almost! Set against each other from the start. But you know what?"

"Hm?"

"They fall in love."

"Oh."

"Cliche, right? Enemies to lovers in a myth?"

"A little." Quackity nods, but he's breathing slow and steady, "But that's okay."

"It is." Karl agrees, blinking back tears. "It is. It's beautiful. Because the spirit loves him so much. Do you hear me? The spirit knows what he has done in the past, what he might have to do in the future, but he loves him so much. Through it all, he loves him. All that freedom, it means nothing in the face of not being able to be with him."

“No.” Quackity shakes his head, “It isn’t worth it. It isn’t. He’s chained, Karl. He’s chained forever.”

“He isn’t. I wrote this part, remember?” Karl finds Quackity’s face in the dark, thumbs rubbing under his eyes, wiping the damp tears, “I wrote it. And I swear to you, they love each other so much it’s a little silly. And he isn’t the only one. It takes a little bit, a lot of hurt and confusion, some misunderstandings, but the child of love makes friends. People who care about him, too. He doesn’t just have the spirit anymore, he has - he has a whole group. A whole group of people that love him. That want to help save him. Because maybe the shadow still has a hold, but he isn’t all that the child is anymore.”

“I like this story.” Quackity admits and then a fresh wave of misery falls over him, “I like this part of it. I’m jealous.”

“Quackity.” Karl noses along his jaw, presses gentle kisses to the corners of his eyes, down his cheek, “Quackity, can you feel how much I love you? When I hold you, do you feel how much I love you?”

“Mhm.” Quackity nods, otherwise silent.

“Do you want to know how the story ends? How I wrote the ending?”

“Mhm.”

“We win.” Karl says into his hair, “We win. We save you. We love you. You escape the shadow and you get to be happy with us.”

“I don’t deserve that, Karl -

“Neither do I.” Karl cuts him off, “And which of us is worse? The one who’s been hurt so fucking much, or the one that did it because he was bored and needed some spending money? I’m sorry, Q. I’m so sorry. I didn’t just betray Sapnap, every day that I didn’t tell you why Schlatt really hired me was another day I was betraying you, too. I’m *so* sorry.”

“You didn’t know -”

“And you didn’t have a *choice*.” Karl cups his face. “I love you. I love you so much. I love you. I love you after what happened and I love you now and I’ll love you in ten, twenty, a hundred years. I’ll love you if you help me save Sapnap and I’ll love you if you don’t. Do you hear me? I wrote this ending.”

“I -” Quackity quakes. He shakes so hard he nearly vibrates out of Karl’s arms, “I - I don’t want to be in this shadow anymore, Karl, I don’t want it. I want to be free, too. I want this ending.”

“Then it’s the ending we’ll get.” Karl presses their foreheads together again. “With Sapnap.”

“With Sapnap.” Quackity agrees.

“You’ll help me?”

“Of course I will.” Quackity sits up, wipes his face, “Of course I will. It’s my fault he’s down there. He’s all alone. He’s probably so scared and angry and -”

“And worried.” Karl reminds him. “So let’s go to him.”

“Yeah.” Quackity breathes in deep and then stands on shaky legs and pulls Karl up, “Let’s go to him.”

They go.

Well. Quackity makes a stop first; a familiar enderchest sits next to where Quackity had been curled up.

“You think he’ll be less angry if I bring him a present?” Quackity asks, shy, and holds up Nightmare.

“I think he’ll love that present, baby.” Karl grins and they both down invis potions.

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

Holy shit here we are. The final (!!!) chapter. We know, we know, we have another chapter to go but that was always more of a short epilogue (and that might be here sooner than you think, lucky lovely readers!)

As always we owe a huge debt of thanks to our beta readers, you know who you are and you are all awesome and incredible!

To the wonderful artists who have made art (holy shit????) for our little fic - thank you so much. They're all listed in previous chapters but if you haven't yet, please please check them out, they're all insanely talented and we appreciate each and every one of you!

To you, our dearest readers, thank you for coming on this journey with us, we have loved having you along and your comments have always been the best part of our days for the last few weeks. We love you so so much

And finally - because I know y'all are desperate to get on with the chapter, my final thanks is to hannah - personalised-radio, my incredible co-writer, one of my absolute best friends and genuinely one of the most fantastic people I ever had the fortune to meet. I am so glad that the universe aligned so that we not only existed at the same time, but had the chance to meet. From bandom to AH/CC to dsmp, and all the other fandoms we dipped in and out of over the years, we met because of writing fic all the way when we were both in highschool and now here we are, adults; still friends, still writing fic and still (unfortunately) continents away from each other. Lets hope that one day, that last one will change. Fingers crossed.

And because I've been sappy enough for now, lets get right to it! We love you all very much.

cw for this chapter // implied abuse, implied intimate partner violence, character death, graphic descriptions of injury.

(hold onto that angst with a happy ending tag yall!)

Sapnap loses track of time in the cell. Though in all honesty, cell is a generous term; it's a hole in the ground, covered in a metal grate that's just out of his reach unless he stands on the very tips of his toes. After the last week, his muscles feel like a thousand needles are buried beneath his skin, the dull burn of each tendon held too tight or made too small. He can barely move, even if there was room to do much more than sit and stand, in alternate moments. He's dizzy; they threw him into the hole, and he's pretty sure he hit his head. It's difficult to tell, with how much his entire body hurts already.

There is no window to track the sun by, and no guard rotation to keep track of. It's only darkness. He's just...abandoned. He thinks he sleeps. If he does, it's fitful and full of bad dreams. If he doesn't, then his mind wanders until he's trapped in memories he doesn't want to face. Either way,

they cause panic to settle in his chest. He tries to breathe through it, but Quackity's tricks just remind him of Quackity, and of Karl, and of how much they've hurt him and how much he misses them, which reminds him of how much he misses George and Dream, which starts the whole process over until -

Until -

He thinks he sleeps, or maybe he just breathes wrong until he passes out.

He's sore. He aches from toes to ears from days sitting in the cage, holding his friends close so they couldn't be torn from him. He doesn't think he has tears left to cry at this point.

With nothing else to do and no way to escape, he ends up thinking about his parents. The last he heard from Bad, they were planning to stay in the capitol until he sent word - he'd not sent word since. Sapnap isn't sure if he wants them to still be here. He can't see a way out of this. He doesn't want Bad and Skeppy to watch him die; but he thinks it may be a comfort, to see his parents one last time before his head rolls. Bad would cry. Skeppy might try to stop it, damn the rules. Maybe, for their sake, he would prefer if they'd run already, if they'd decided to surprise him in the Badlands by being there to welcome him. That sounds like a Skeppy plan. He hopes they don't wait for him long after he dies.

It's while he's weighing that decision, ultimately not up to him but a way to pass the time, that he hears footsteps approaching, the door to the room he's in opening slowly. Light, dim and weak, reaches him. It hurts his eyes, stinging despite the weakness after so long in the dark.

"It's gotta be this one," a familiar voice carries despite its attempt at whispering.

"You said that about the *last* one, baby,"

"Shut up, I don't come down here often! It's an oublie, Karl, it's a secret by definition! You're the one who was supposed to have maps memorized!"

"Of the castle! This is the dungeons, they don't make maps of the *dungeons!*"

"Then you're as blind as I am, so stop complaining."

"I wasn't *complaining*, excuse me, I was - hey, is that a door?"

"On the ground?"

Sapnap slowly stands up. His knees nearly give out but he uses the wall as support. His head is stuffy, he feels...he doesn't really know. Relief, and guilt, and anger, and confusion, and, worst of all, worry. Why are they down here? Why are they in the dungeons?

"Yes, on the ground." Karl sounds excited, "That must be - Sapnap? Sapnap!"

Sapnap stands in the center of the cell, still too dark to see much at all, standing under the grate. "Karl? Quackity, is that you?"

"Sapnap!" Karl shouts, voice echoing.

"Shut *up!*" Quackity hisses, "Karl, they'll hear you!"

"Sorry! I just -"

"Where are you?" Sapnap looks harder, but he can't *see* them. They sound so *close* but all he can

see is a flame. A torch, held in midair. “I can’t see you?”

“Oh, it’s the invis! Hold on a second, I’ll just -” Karl says and then trails off. Sapnap hears clinking bottles and then Karl is shimmering into view, a pint glass of milk in hand. “Here I am!”

Sapnap opens his mouth, but he can’t think of what to say. To see Karl again is a relief that nearly takes his legs out from under him - and he looks *good*. His hair is clean and he’s sunburnt from the march but he’s wearing his cloak and he’s *smiling*. He’s smiling *his* smile. He looks like he still needs sleep and his wrists are bandaged thickly and he’s still bruised up from the beating a week ago, but he’s alive and here, above Sapnap.

In the dungeon.

The relief curdles.

“What are you doing here?” He demands, reaching up. If he stands on his tip-toes, his fingers can curl through the slots of the door. “Karl, what are you *doing*? You need to get out of here!”

“I will!” Karl kneels, hands finding Sapnap’s through the trap door, looking serious, the milk disappearing in mid-air, “As soon as we get you out.”

“Karl...”

“It’ll be quick.” Karl squeezes his hands, “Quackity stole the keys.”

“Quackity...” Sapnap looks, a little desperate, “I heard him, is he here, too?”

“I’m here.” Quackity says, subdued. There’s another clink as he sips at the milk until it’s gone and then he’s shimmering into view, too; bruised, pale, eyes on the ground. He’s the one holding the torch.

“You’re here.” Sapnap says, and his voice comes out wondrous.

Quackity has new bruises, Sapnap sees immediately. His non-scarred eye is completely black, lip split, other cheek yellowing along the bone. The necklace of purple looks near-black in the torchlight. It hurts. It hurts more than it should.

“I...” Quackity inhales slowly, exhales even slower. Sapnap counts to eleven in his head with him. “Sapnap, I...”

Karl puts his free hand on his shoulder, comforting. “Take your time. Well, maybe not too much time, but -”

“Karl.” Sapnap shushes him and Karl goes quiet. Quackity shifts awkwardly and tries again.

“I’m so sorry.” Quackity’s shoulders go up but he kneels down next to Karl, peering down at Sapnap. “That’s all I can say. I’m *so* sorry.”

“Can you...” Sapnap wants to reach out but he couldn’t reach Quackity even if he let himself try. His fingers tighten in the slats. “Why? Why’d you do it? Can you tell us that?”

Quackity goes quiet again, swirling the little milk droplets left over in the pint glass just to do something with his hands before he lays the bottle aside.

“I got scared.” he finally says. Something deep in Sapnap’s heart twists at the way he shrinks in on himself, a reflex he’s regained over the time they’ve been apart. “I...a lot of stuff was happening in

my head. Techno brought up a lot of memories, and then you - you said you -” Quackity shakes his head, “No. No. I did it because *I* made the decision to. You didn’t...it wasn’t you, Sapnap. I don’t want you to think it was anything you did. I did it for me, because I was scared and selfish. And I’m so sorry.”

Sapnap wants to say *it’s okay*. He wants to say *I forgive you, let’s move on*. But he can’t, because he doesn’t understand. Quackity says it wasn’t anything Sapnap *did*, but *something* must have happened. Something must have gone wrong. Karl said they’d decided to stay. Why hadn’t Quackity *stayed*?

“I still don’t understand.” Sapnap admits. “Can you explain it to me?”

Quackity breathes in sharply and says, “It was me.”

“*What* was you?”

“It was me, in the coup. I was the one - you saved *me*, Sapnap. If it wasn’t for me, you would have gotten to Dream and George in time. None of this would have happened if it wasn’t for me asking for help. And I know, I know it’s a pathetic excuse but I thought that you...it meant so much to me, all this time, that you’d take time to help me but then I caused you so much pain. I caused you *so much* pain. And you regretted it. You regretted saving me, and... And you were right. I - I just -” He trails off, voice shaking, “It wasn’t your fault. It was mine.”

Sapnap’s heart aches. He wants to say something but he doesn’t know what he could possibly say.

“No.” Karl is the one that speaks up, shaking his head, “No, it wasn’t. That night...from what I understand, that night was bad. For everyone. It doesn’t -” He moves his gentle hand to Quackity’s arm, “It doesn’t erase what you did. Calling Schlatt, that is. But whatever happened in the coup wasn’t your fault.”

“I didn’t even want to fucking *be there!*” Quackity explodes, “I didn’t! Eret *wanted* me to and I hoped Schlatt would say no because I wasn’t allowed at the castle before, but he didn’t. He didn’t, and then there were so many fucking *knight*s everywhere and they just - they just *attacked* me and I was running, and then y-you were there, Sapnap.” Quackity trips over his words with how fast he’s talking, eyes closing tight in memory, “You were there. And you saved me. You didn’t even ask what side I was on you, you just - you saw I was in trouble and you *helped*. You gave me your sword and led me to safety. And I repaid you by holding you back from saving your best friend. By informing on you to Schlatt. I should have left, when I realized. I should have left right then, because I knew Schlatt wouldn’t let me go and simply *being* with you was dangerous for you. But I was...I was selfish about that, too. Because I liked being with you, both of you. You made me feel happy, and safe, and like - like it was okay to feel like that.”

He trails off, and he isn’t crying but he looks close to it.

“Dream wasn’t your fault.” He finally settles down enough to say. “Dream was *not* your fault, Sapnap. And me calling Schlatt, that wasn’t you, either. That was me. Schlatt made his decisions, but I made mine, too. I regret it. I regretted it the second I did it, but I felt like - I don’t know. I can’t explain it. It’s like when you’re walking and you don’t think about where you’re going so you just end up somewhere familiar. Doing what Schlatt wanted, that was familiar. That was...safe, maybe.”

“It wasn’t safe.” Sapnap clears his throat. “It wasn’t safe for you.”

“No.” Quackity lets his shoulders drop down, slowly, slowly, like honey from a spoon, tension

releasing like a trapped breath, “No, it wasn’t. More importantly, it wasn’t safe for you or George. I put you both in a lot of danger, trying to deal with my shit. You both got hurt. You both might die, all *three* of you might, because of me. I can’t...I can’t let that happen.”

Quackity reaches into a pocket, pulls out a set of keys and brings the torch closer to the door, nearly blinding Sapnap, with a determined set to his brow.

“We’re getting you out, and we’re going to find George and XD and get them out, too. No one else is gonna pay for my mistakes.”

“We’ve got people waiting,” Karl says, voice subdued as he edges away to give Quackity room, “At the courthouse. They’re going to strike as soon as George is there.”

The key clicks and Sapnap feels the grate shift as they pull it up. As it leaves his fingers, so does Karl’s hand but only for long enough for the grate to thud to the ground with a heavy thump. Then Karl is back, two hands engulfing one of Sapnap’s. The touch is desperate despite Karl’s casual voice.

“Oh, man, not that I don’t deeply love and appreciate how stacked you are, baby,” Karl complains, “But this is gonna be hard. Q, I’m gonna need help.”

“Do you mind...?” Quackity offers a hand, shy, and Sapnap -

Sapnap is tired. Sapnap hurts. He’s exhausted. His heart has been trampled, his trust shattered, his hope nearly extinguished. He’s been dreaming of cold hands on his skin for days, of the comforting weight of a truly ugly cloak, of two pairs of arms and fond eyes and fonder voices. He’s been scared out of his mind even while he sat in the dark, scared that Quackity or Karl or George or Dream - scared for them. That he’d never see them again. That he’d die without even a goodbye.

He shakes his head and takes Quackity’s hand. Quackity sets the torch down and it, somehow, doesn’t go out. They both wrap both hands around Sapnap’s and Sapnap braces himself.

“Just get me high enough that I can pull myself up.” He says quietly and tries to think of himself as *light as a feather*. It’s what Dream always told him to do, when they were jumping and running over roofs and through trees.

“On the count of three.” Karl nods and then, on the count of three, both he and Quackity heave and Sapnap jumps. Between his spring and their support, it’s not an impossible jump to make. Both of them go tumbling backward, Quackity landing on his butt and Karl full-on bowling over into a pile. Sapnap catches himself on the cobblestone ground, hay and cracks in the stone offering his fingers rough holds that scrape at his skin as he catches them. Quackity scrabbles forward, hands going to grip at his shirt and *pull* as Sapnap tries to lift the rest of his body out of the hole. Karl’s there in seconds, hands on his hips and lifting.

Sapnap thinks of the rock on the mountain, helping them both down. Now, they help him up.

With one last, breathless “*Prime*,” from Karl, Sapnap is pulled out of the cell. He collapses to the ground, arms trembling, and lets himself breathe the somewhat fresher air.

“Sapnap?” Quackity hovers at his side, “Sapnap, are you okay?”

“You came for me.” Sapnap finds himself blinking at the wall, stones dancing with shadows cast by the torch. “You came back for me. Both of you.”

“Of course, we did.” Karl pulls at his shoulders and Sapnap allows himself to be bullied onto his

knees.

Quackity sits next to him, face open and worried. It's familiar, being able to see the emotions on his face.

"Sap..." Quackity swallows. "You had every right to doubt me. You still do. But I couldn't leave you."

Sapnap breathes in sharply and Quackity flinches, looking down at the ground again.

And Sapnap, not knowing what else to do, just throws his arms around Quackity and hugs him tight. It's all he can do to not break down right in that moment, having Quackity safe in his arms, whole and alive and away from Schlatt. He's *furious*. He's still so fucking angry, but Karl and Quackity are okay. They're okay.

"Sapnap, are you -" Karl says in a panic before he must realize that it's just a hug. Instead of continuing, he just puts his hand on Sapnap's back, rubs down his spine. Sapnap thought he was all cried out, but it turns out he'd just needed a few hours to gather up the tears because he knows he's dampening Quackity's neck with them now.

"I'm still mad." Sapnap tries not to sniffle and fails. Quackity is tense in his arms, but Sapnap feels him slowly bring his hands up to hold him, press his palms flat to Sapnap's back and bring him closer. "I'm still so freakin' pissed off, at *both* of you. You should have told me. You should have told me before you made me fall for you."

"We know." Karl agrees, his voice a little teary, too.

"And you should have *told me* that it was you," Sapnap bonks his head on Quackity's shoulder - gently, because he doesn't know what bruises lay hidden by his clothes, "Because I would have just *told you* that I was *upset* and just *saying* stupid *shit*. I don't regret saving you, angel. I don't regret saving you any of the times I've saved you. I don't fucking regret meeting you. Do you understand, you *dumb* man?"

"I don't know if I understand why," Quackity says, "But I get it. I get it now."

"I love you." Sapnap says, and the truth of it sinks deep into his bones, hangs in the air around them like the sweetest summer smell. He knew it, but he didn't *know* it until the words fell out of his mouth like gospel, "I *love* you. Are you hearing me? I will *never* regret loving you. Either of you."

"Okay." Quackity goes loose, relaxes in Sapnap's hold. "I hear you."

"Fucking gods," Sapnap says, rolling his eyes and trying to put some force into his voice instead of letting out the sobs threatening to spill over, "Say it back! You're supposed to say it back!"

"I love you." Quackity says with a surprised laugh. "I love you, Sapnap. I'm sorry. I love you."

"Hey, me, too!" Karl complains, "I said it *first!*"

"I love you, too." Quackity starts to sniffle, too, "Fuck, don't make me cry, again, *please*. I hate crying, guys, for Prime's sake. We've all cried far too fucking much."

"Shut up." Sapnap pulls away to wipe at his face roughly. "Cry. I don't care."

"Hey, hey, Sapnap," Karl touches his shoulder and, when Sapnap leans into it, he moves his hands

up to cup Sapnap's face, wipes his eyes with his thumbs. Sapnap blinks in the torchlight and sees Karl smiling. It's one of Sapnap's favorites, reserved almost exclusively for when they were all crowded on the bed under his cloak. "Tell me you love me."

"You know I love you." Sapnap protests and then has to clear his throat again, "You knew before *I* knew, probably."

"I still wanna hear it. I want this love circle to be completed."

"It would be a love triangle." Quackity says weakly.

"I don't care what shape it is," Karl grins, "I just want to hear it from both of you."

"I love you." Sapnap gives in. "Even if you're fucking dumb, too."

"I love you, too." Karl chirps. "I love you, Sapnap. I love you, Quackity. I want to go live on a farm with both of you."

"You'd fucking hate a farm, Karl, do you know how much work it is?" Quackity says, and the way his voice picks up and gathers strength fills Sapnap's heart with more warmth than a winter fire.

"Yeah," Sapnap agrees, "What about your library, dude, you'll leave all that behind?"

"I don't care," Karl says, shaking his head, eyes starting to redden with welling tears. "I'd live in the fire swamp if it meant that I could be with you two. I'd spend the rest of my life in that shitty cave if it was with you."

"If I was trapped in a cave with you two again, it wouldn't be a very long life," Sapnap says, and even though the world is still twisted and wrong - George and Dream still need to be saved, Schlatt needs to be fucking eviscerated - he has two of the people he loves safe in his arms and for this moment, it will be enough. Quackity shakes with laughter and the sound is good. It's *good*.

"Let's just focus on living past tonight before we worry about a farm, okay?" Sapnap says, reveling in the warmth of Quackity's laughter.

"I want to live on a farm with you both, too." Quackity admits, like a secret. "I don't want to be here anymore. I don't want to see Schlatt ever again. I want to stay with you guys."

"Of c-course you do," Karl sniffles, biting his wobbling lip. "We're the best! Sapnap can bench press us at the same time and I - I -" he breaks halfway through his words, weeping into Sapnap's hair as he stutters, "- look like this, why wouldn't you want to farm with us for the rest of our lives?"

"I really do." Quackity says warmly. Sapnap missed that, too, the way he could feel Quackity's sincerity in just the tone of his words. "Sapnap?"

"...yeah." Sapnap nods, nose to Quackity's jaw as he takes in the feeling of being encased by them again. Quackity's cold hands through his thin shirt and Karl's arms around them both. "I want that."

"Okay." Karl coughs loudly and stands up, hands dropping Sapnap like Karl has to drag himself away. "Okay. Then we're going to do that. But first, we have to go get George. He's gonna bankroll this endeavor so we kind of need him. And XD, too, we need him to help plow because the gods know I won't do it."

“Good points.” Sapnap carefully stands up, too, and does some deep breathing to calm down. He can’t make himself let go of either of them, though, a hand finding Quackity’s and another wrapping tight in Karl’s cloak. Quackity stands and picks up the torch with his free hand.

“We’ll take our last potions when we reach the top of the dungeons and we’ll head to the courthouse straight away to meet Niki and Technoblade and the rest.” Karl explains, “So let’s just be quiet and, hopefully, that will get us out of here.”

“Niki and Technoblade!?”

“Long story.” Karl shakes his head, “I punched Wilbur Soot in his stupid face. Impressed?”

“So impressed.” Quackity nods quickly, “That’s really hot, actually. I’ve always wanted to punch Wilbur in the face.”

“It’s a very punchable face.” Sapnap concurs, despite feeling like he’s missed a major step, somehow. They spoke to Niki? To Technoblade?

“I’ll show you the bruise when we see him,” Karl promises, “It’s gnarly. Ready?”

“Ready.” Sapnap and Quackity say together and then share shy smiles.

They’re only just starting to walk, creeping in an oddly clingy line down the hall, when Quackity stops, pulling their line up short.

“Wait.” He says and his hand drops from Sapnap’s, where their fingers had been clamped together. Sapnap feels his stomach drop to his feet.

“What’s wrong?” Karl glances over his shoulder at him, leading the charge as he is.

“I forgot,” Quackity says as Sapnap’s heart tries to recover from the brief terror of thinking Quackity may have changed his mind. Sapnap watches Quackity unholster his sword from his belt and carefully hand it to Sapnap. “I got it back for you.”

The hilt, when Sapnap touches it, is icy cold.

“Nightmare.” he says without even needing to unsheathe the sword. He knows it. He would know it blind, the hilt so second-nature to him now.

“I took care of it.” Quackity explains quietly. “I know it’s important to you.”

Dream’s sword. Sapnap carefully straps it to his belt. He’s going to save George, and what’s left of Dream, with this sword.

“Thank you.” He says seriously, and Quackity smiles like the sun.

Sapnap drinks the invis before they leave the dungeons proper, but there is only a skeleton crew guarding the entire dungeon.

“It’s because of the trial.” Quackity lowers his voice to a whisper, “Everyone’s at the courthouse, making sure there isn’t any trouble.”

“Fuck.” Sapnap wilts but Karl just squeezes his hand.

“Hey,” Sapnap can’t see Karl but he feels the hand on his back as Karl leans in to him, “We have

people on our side. It's not just you and George running anymore.”

Sapnap lets the touch and the words comfort him. There's a part of him that says *don't trust*, but he pushes it away. They'll have time after that later. For Sapnap to rage and be mad and be petty. Time for Karl and Quackity to make it up to him. Time for them to rebuild trust, with nothing hidden. Time. He hopes they have time. For now, he wants to. He wants to trust. He wants to believe Karl. He wants to believe that they will win this and he'll see George again. Dream, again, in any way he can.

They push into the guardhouse, but only two guards are present and only one is facing the door. The other is sleeping, book laying open on her face, while her partner rolls dice on the table to keep himself distracted.

In the end, escape isn't difficult. Karl pulls a few of the empty potion pots from his bag and tosses them deeper into the dungeon, the glass shattering and skittering loudly across the cobblestone.

The guard with the book on her face wakes with a yell, drawing her sword and standing on instinct while the one playing with dice loses them under the table as he, too, stands.

“What was that?” The book-guard gawks.

“Dunno. But we gotta find out.” The dice-guard draws his sword, too, and they both creep into the hall.

Sapnap takes the chance, fingers bumping against someone else who had the same idea, and they quietly open the door to the guardhouse and slip out.

“Roll call.” Karl whispers a second later, “We all out?”

“I am.”

“Me, too.”

The door closes, just as quiet, and, suddenly...Sapnap is free. The sunlight is hot on him, warming him to his bones. He feels himself start to heat up and he steps away from Karl and Quackity, breathes in the fresh air and lets it sink in.

“I can feel your heat from here.” Karl complains quietly, but he sounds near giddy.

“Let him burn.” Quackity says from somewhere behind him, “He'll get it out now.”

“I want to hold *hands*.” Karl grumbles, but the grumpy tone is only barely covering his amusement.

“You can still hold my hand.” Sapnap allows. “You're just gonna get burnt.”

“I'll wait.”

“Coward.” Quackity teases, “It's not that bad.”

“You're a freak.” Karl argues, “An absolute freak. He's literally boiling and you're out here just shoving your hands all over him.”

“Oh, no, don't shove your hands all over me,” Sapnap intones and hears them both giggle. A wandering hand does find his back, clutch lightly, away from the skin. Karl.

“As fun as this is, we've got about eight minutes to get to the courthouse before we're visible

again. It'll be easier to hide you in a crowd, Sap."

Sapnap agrees so he takes one more second to really soak in the sunlight, a stray cloud slowly meandering between him and the direct solar beams, and then finds Karl's wrist. He throws a hand around in Quackity's general direction until he finds him, too, and the three of them start moving again, holding on to each other as to not get lost.

The royal courthouse is within the walls of the castle but separate from the main structure. A large courtyard separates it from the rest of the goings-on of the castle, usually used as the site for executions or punishments ordered by the court. When not being used for high-profile cases, the courthouse is where the council meets. Sapnap has only been inside a handful of times, never one to volunteer during court duty like Dream (who usually spent the hours sneakily holding George's hand under the tables) on the off chance that his dad saw him and roped him into *politics*, but he's seen the *outside* countless times when he was brave enough to stumble by. He's never seen it as absolutely packed as it is this evening.

There are people practically hanging out of the windows, the peasantry from town having made their way up as their workdays came to an end and the promise of a royal trial lay a bread trail to entice them to watch.

"Damn." Karl says, impressed, "I don't even see them. Can we get in? Quackity? Think you could sneak us through a side door?"

"I'm still supposed to be locked up in Schlatt's rooms." Quackity says apologetically. "Schlatt didn't want me out until -" he cuts off.

"Until?" Sapnap repeats encouragingly.

"Until he killed you." Quackity finishes. "He was going to make me watch."

"Oh." Karl says lightly, and then, in a tone he could be using to describe the weather, "I'm gonna break his kneecaps as soon as I get the chance."

"Anyway," Quackity briskly moves past it, "I know where Wilbur liked to go to smoke. I bet if he's anywhere before a stressful situation, it's there."

Quackity drags Sapnap around the crowd and Sapnap drags Karl after him. They make it around the back of the courthouse, where many but not *as* many people are gathered, and Quackity leads them past even that, into a tiny grove of short trees and bushes.

"Here?" Sapnap asks as the tingling of the invis pot wearing off begins. "Trees?"

"Well, it wouldn't be a very good hiding spot to smoke if it were obvious, Sap." Quackity points out, shimmering into view kneeling behind one of the bushes. He feels around for a moment before he finds the right place and shoves the foliage out of the way, revealing a little trap door.

"I'm getting sick of trap doors." Sapnap sighs, but lifts the metal when Quackity gives him an imploring look. It comes up silently, well-oiled and well-used.

Quackity slips through first. Karl follows quickly after and then Sapnap climbs down. At least there's a ladder this time. He closes the trap door over his head as he goes, leaving them in - not darkness. The walls are glowstone.

"Of course they are." Sapnap says under his breath but shakes his head when Quackity gives him a questioning look.

Quackity leads them down the tunnel, footsteps quick and confident.

They hear Tommy before anyone else.

“I should go stand out there and look for them!”

“Tommy, I told you,” Wilbur’s voice drips with faux patience, “They’ll get here.”

“They aren’t *here*, Wil, and things are going to *start* soon!”

“I knew we should have just gone to the dungeons,” a familiar, harried voice breaks in. Sapnap doesn’t mean to, but he’s suddenly overtaking Quackity, nearly stumbling in his haste. “As *soon* as we heard, we should have just marched our little butts right up to that - that *muffinhead* and -”

“*Dad!*” Sapnap bursts from the tunnel, which leads into, surprisingly, the council break room where a number of recognizable people have gathered. Sapnap doesn’t give a fuck about them, though, because -

“Pandas!” Bad bowls both Tommy and Wilbur over as his long body bounces through them and toward Sapnap. They meet in the middle, heads knocking hard against each other in relieved greeting.

“I thought you were gone!” Sapnap feels his dad wrap elongated arms around him, squeezing him tight in an ever-heating embrace as Bad’s body temperature skyrockets and Sapnap’s does the same to match. He thinks smoke may start to rise off the tips of his hair and the materials of his clothes but he can’t make himself mind, not with his dad finally here.

“I thought *you* were gone! Scep and I were nearly out of Kinoko when we got word that they’d dragged you right back! Are you okay? Did he hurt you?”

Bad’s hands find his face and Sapnap lets himself be tilted up and around so Bad can get a look at him, blinking hard to avoid steam rising.

“I’m okay. He didn’t do anything to me. George, though, and - and *Dream*, dad, *Dream* -”

“Bad, get *out* of my *way*!” Skeppy exclaims, interrupting, “Let me see my son!”

“Sorry!” Bad steps to the side and Sapnap barely has a moment to see Skeppy fully encrusted in diamond skin before hard gem is plastered against him and he’s being hugged by both of his parents.

“Hi, Skeppy.” Sapnap grins and Skeppy smacks him over the head - as gently as Skeppy ever does.

“Don’t you *hi*, *Skeppy* me, Sapnap!” Skeppy yanks him in for another rough hug, “I was so fucking worried!”

“Language,” Bad says wetly.

“Worry about language later.” Skeppy isn’t a crier like Bad, but Sapnap hears the relief clear as day. He hugs his father tighter, Bad’s arms around them both and keeping them safe. It’s been so long. He’s missed them so much.

“I’m glad you’re both okay.” he mumbles, “I was worried.”

“Us? We can take care of ourselves!”

“Not to break up this moving moment,” Wilbur speaks up, “But we do have stuff happening.”

Sapnap glances at him and sees Quackity and Karl standing behind him, both looking nervous and a little scared. Punz and Niki are there, too, alongside all of Wilbur’s brothers. Punz waves awkwardly and it would make Sapnap laugh if he weren’t so confused. But, while he has them all here, he has something more important to do than demand to know why Punz is suddenly working to help him and George now.

“Right.” he steps back, shaking himself out to center himself. Bad and Skeppy let him go and Bad settles an arm around Skeppy’s shoulders instead. “Bad, Skeppy, you probably already know at least one of them, but let me introduce you to Q and Karl.”

“The stuff happening was not introducing your boyfriends to your parents, Sapnap!”

“Shut up, Wilbur.” Quackity steps hard on Wilbur’s foot, face melting into a careful mask of pleasantry. Wilbur yelps and hops away from him, knocking into Technoblade, who lets himself take the tumble for what Sapnap can only assume is the thrill of it.

“Nice to meet you, Mr. and Mr. Sapnap’s parents.” Karl sweeps in immediately, pulling Quackity closer and bowing low.

“Boyfriends?” Bad asks politely. Skeppy doesn’t look impressed.

“It’s a little soon for labels.” Sapnap says awkwardly, “But...boyfriend...adjacent?”

“I’m gonna marry your son!” Karl says confidently.

“Boyfriend-adjacent works.” Quackity covers Karl’s mouth. “Nice to meet you off the floor, Bad.”

“You’re Schlatt’s boy.” Skeppy peers closely at him, “The one who ran away. You’re the plan that went wrong.”

“That’s me.” Quackity nods. Sapnap sees how tense he is, the way his shoulders bow in fake relaxation.

“He’s not Schlatt’s boy,” Karl pulls Quackity’s hands away from his mouth, “His name is Quackity.”

“I’m not Schlatt’s.” Quackity repeats and smiles. It makes Sapnap a little breathless. He takes a step toward them, smiles back immediately when Karl notices and grins at him.

“Oh,” Skeppy looks between them, suspicion clearing, “Oh, that’s precious.”

“We are in the *middle* of a *coup*,” Wilbur says loudly from the floor, where Technoblade has pinned him by pretending to be knocked out from the fall, “need I remind everyone!”

“Shut up, Wil, this is beautiful.” Tommy kicks at his brother, “You’re ruining the moment.”

“Aww,” Tubbo agrees, “Ranboo, when we get married, I’ll introduce you to Phil, okay?”

“I know Phil?” Ranboo says with confusion, “But okay.”

“You two aren’t getting married.” Tommy disagrees with a matter-of-fact tone and, as their bickering fills the room, Bad looks all three of them over and nods seriously.

“I look forward to getting to know you a little better.” Bad smiles, “Before any sort of wedding.”

“I call being the favorite son-in-law!” Karl says firmly and Sapnap tries not to notice the way his face flushes with heat.

“Karl, shut up!”

“Don’t tell your fiance to shut up, Sapnap!”

“He isn’t my fiance until he asks *me*, Skeppy!”

Sapnap is ready to dig in about it but Punz and Niki both step forward, Punz with his battle face on.

“Sap.” His friend shifts from one foot to another, unbalanced, uncertain, “We...”

“You have reason to not trust us.” Niki speaks up, “We were following orders when we tried to bring you back but, really, it was for selfish reasons. We wanted George to lead a revolution, and we refused to think about why the three of you were on the run in the first place. We should have just tried to contact you.”

“It would have been appreciated.” Sapnap clenches his fists and then lets them go loose. “But it’s in the past. You’re helping now, right?”

“Always.” Punz meets his eyes and offers a hand. “We’ve got your back. All of us. The others are in the crowd, ready for the signal.”

Sapnap takes his hand and gets tugged into a rough, back-pounding hug that he returns just as fiercely.

“Speaking of signals -” Karl speaks up, “We need to go over the plan, things will start soon and -”

The whole room goes quiet, levity draining as loud horns blow in the court, the low, deep bass echoing into the room.

“It’s starting?” Wilbur finally clammers to his feet, brows furrowed. “I thought for sure that they’d drag Dream in, too.”

“What do you mean?” Sapnap looks at him sharply.

“Dream. It’s Dream in the mask, right? He’s not here.” Wilbur looks at him, brushing his hair out of his face. “I can, ‘dunno, sense him. Has to do with the throne, I think, like a connection. It’s how we found you, we just followed my -” he motions at his face, like that’s supposed to help Sapnap understand. “Yeah, but...he isn’t here.”

“Where is he?” Quackity frowns, “You know where XD is being kept?”

Wilbur closes his eyes, breathes in deep as a muffled voice starts to talk in the court.

“I can’t be sure...” he starts, frowning, “But...I think...that feels like the throne room? I think he’s in the throne room.”

The throne room?

The throne room.

“They aren’t coming.” Sapnap realizes. Oh, he’s a fool. He’s a fucking fool.

“What!?”

“Schlatt doesn’t care about a *trial!* He wants the throne, they’re in the throne room!” Sapnap rushes back toward the tunnel, “He’s got them both in the throne room!”

“Sapnap -” Karl starts, reaching for him, “Sapnap, wait -”

But Sapnap is already running. His heart is beating a tattoo into his chest, panic flooding his veins and even as his muscles catch and spark into a forest fire and his lungs begin to scream, he can’t stop.

He can’t be too late again, not when he just got them back.

He can hear shouting, drowned out by the rushing in his ears, slowly fading out behind him as he sprints back down the tunnel and up the ladder. He throws the latch open, scrambles out and doesn’t bother closing it as he takes off for the castle proper.

There are still so many people out, listening to the opening remarks of a mock trial. Peasantry and guards intermingle, a handful of them familiar from the ambush, more familiar from Sapnap’s time training with them. Sapnap pushes through the crowd, dread swelling up as he’s slowed.

He’s sure the others give chase but he won’t stop; he can’t stop, not for his parents, not for Wilbur fucking Soot and not for the ones who have his heart. He can’t stop, because George and Dream are in the throne room, that fucking throne room, and Sapnap refuses to be too late again.

He’s recognized immediately.

“Hey! Hey, that’s the prisoner!” Someone suddenly shouts, “How’d he get here!?”

A hand drops on Sapnap’s shoulder, rough, but he shoves it off and pushes someone out of his way, hunkering down and just ramming into shoulders until the crowd catches on and makes way for him.

As if drawn out of his nightmares of the last chaotic night of a coup in the castle, there is the sound of clashing boots and scraping metal. Shouts filter through; some familiar, some not, but all come up short when Sapnap finally makes his way through the crowd of townspeople and comes face to face with a slew of palace guards. Some he even recognizes, but not in the way that has his gut sinking like a stone, his own body hating that he must turn his sword on a friend. No, these are the guards that dragged him back to the capitol like a rabid dog - them and their fellow mercenaries.

Well. He’s going to enjoy showing them just how rabid he can be.

He draws Nightmare. The hilt is cool in his hands but the singing for violence warms him. He crashes into the guards, netherite biting through leather and iron, clanging against blade and wood.

Sapnap feels like a storm as he strikes, not thinking at all, just letting his body move. All he can think about is that night. About being too late. He doesn’t regret Quackity, doesn’t regret spending an ounce of time to save his life - but he can’t be late again. So he doesn’t pull his punches and he doesn’t hesitate. Still, there are many and Sapnap is tired and not at his best. His muscles ache as he fights and he is slowly pushed back.

The battle croons to him, but his anxiety beats louder, always has.

Nightmare sings in his grasp, but it’s not fast enough. *He*’s never fast enough.

There is a moment when he realizes he’s beginning to be overwhelmed, but it lasts only seconds before the temperature in the atmosphere begins to ratchet up, cool summer night to near Crimson

Forest levels in the span of seconds. He watches the guards around him falter and fall back, many of them yelling out as their armor traps the heat against their skin.

“Who taught you to run off like that!?” Bad shouts, he and Skeppy rushing through the hole in the crowd Sapnap had made, “Sapnap, you little -”

“Language!” Skeppy shouts and then bodily throws himself, fully diamond-skinned, into a guard. They both go down screaming for entirely different reasons.

Wilbur is next to join, he and Techno both dropping in with half-feral smiles.

“Finally, my time to shine!” Techno draws his sword, chipped and tinged red with soaked blood. Tommy bounces from his back, where he’d been clinging, holding an axe.

“What are you doing!? Go, fool!” Wilbur shouts; the bastard isn’t wearing armor, but he and Tommy are vicious when they want to be, and Wilbur has always fought the same way that falcons fly; analytic, predatory and lightning-fast in a second.

Punz is suddenly in view, netherite sword drawn and - and then Sapnap sees his friends popping into view already fighting. Ponk bouncing into view casually sword fighting two mercs, Sam and Callahan back to back, Alyssa and Niki with swords drawn and coming down on an incoming group of guards.

“Go!” Punz shouts again, when he does not move, “Go! We’ll hold them off! Get to the throne room and get rid of Schlatt!”

“Sapnap!” he hears from the way he came. When he looks, Karl and Quackity are pushing their way through the crowd, too, slower and without a sword between them. “We’ll catch up!”

Sapnap thinks about waiting even as he turns and starts running again, but he can’t make his legs stop. He couldn’t even if he wanted to. Bad and Technoblade carve a path for him and he only has to raise his sword once more, just to push a guard back and into Skeppy’s path.

The sound of battle fades as he reaches the castle proper. He jogs along the wall until he finds a servant’s entrance, slams it open and scares three maids all collected on the inside.

“Sorry!” He apologizes as he runs by and disappears around a corner.

He knows the castle by heart and he follows the path to the throne room, trying not to think of the mostly empty halls and the memories that echo against the cobblestone. Dream’s laughter in one corner, George’s annoyed whining in another; the time Sapnap snuck into that alcove to slack off and found the two of them already napping, the time Dream had to hunt them down because George and Sapnap had accidentally locked themselves in that storage room and couldn’t get out. This was his home for almost his whole life. It was nearly all he’d known, until six months ago. He doesn’t think he could ever live here again.

He reaches the throne room and stops to catch his breath. He’s panting as he shoves the entry doors open and pushes into the room.

Schlatt is there. He has two guards to either side of him with spears pointed down, a clear show of force as they cross over the neck of the figure bent over on the floor. At his feet, is George, forced to kneel, his arms bound in front of him, glaring up at Schlatt with that pure-bred contempt and rarely seen rage that is all George. The relief at seeing him alive makes Sapnap weak at the knees, before the sight of the spears pointed at George, and the sword hanging casually from Schlatt’s hand pull him back into reality.

“This is a familiar sight.” Sapnap jokes as George’s head snaps to him, eyes going wide.

“Oh, you made it.” George snarks, despite the relief flooding his face, “What took so long?”

“Got a little locked up.” Sapnap raises Nightmare, even as Schlatt turns to face him with a face like thunder, “Sorry.”

“What the fuck is this?” Schlatt motions with his free hand, “You’re supposed to be in the fuckin’ oubliette!”

“If I had a gold piece for every time someone’s said that to me,” Sapnap flicks his eyes around the room, looking for more threats or backup Schlatt might have. He doesn’t see any more guards but he does spot XD, splayed out on the throne, head tilted down. His cloak seems to have mended itself partially, and there is still a faint rise and fall of his chest, for all that he seems unmoving. He’s still unconscious, but he isn’t dead. Sapnap pushes the worry down. It will do him no good right now. He lets the relief through, though.

He did it. He’s here. Neither of them are dead or missing, not yet. He can make this right.

“Get away from him, Schlatt.” he motions with Nightmare, with a confidence his aching legs do not necessarily share, “Now.”

“You’re giving *me* orders?” Schlatt lashes out at George, kicking him flat on his back on the floor, pressing down with one boot on George’s chest without breaking eye contact with Sapnap, “I have the upper hand here, demon boy. I have the prince, I have the presidency, I have the - *ahh, f-fuck!*”

George, no longer at spear point, takes his opportunity while Schlatt is talking and both guards are watching Sapnap, spears at the ready. His legs are untied and Schlatt isn’t watching him; Sapnap sees what he plans just before it happens and feels the pride infuse him as George’s leg rocks up with the strength of a man long used to walking for hours and hours at a time. He nails Schlatt right in the dick and Schlatt cuts off with a high-pitched shriek, mid-word. Schlatt stumbles back on instinct and George wriggles around and launches himself away. It isn’t much space, only a few meters, and if George were alone it would have been a futile move. But it’s enough space for Sapnap to strike and he takes the chance.

He doesn’t remember making it from the door to the guards, but he does, and he’s suddenly between them and George, Nightmare raised against both spears.

“Son of a *bitch*,” Schlatt slowly straightens up his spine, one hand still protectively cupping his groin, “*Ow.*”

“He’s feisty.” Sapnap shrugs, but his voice comes out strained and he knows it. The two guards are strong and they bear down on him with their spears.

“Get him!” Schlatt snarls, and the guards start forward. They’re a lot faster, clearly more practiced and experienced than your average sell-sword. Sapnap only just dodges the first’s swing, parrying the second with a strike that leaves his sore muscles screaming and the guard’s spearhead skittering across the ground. The guard snarls and brandishes the broken weapon, now a splintered rod.

“Yeah, that’s right,” Sapnap says cockily, “Come at me with your stupid stick, dude.”

“I can see your wrist weakening, knight.” the guard with the intact spear smirks, “You won’t last.”

“Try me.” Sapnap swings Nightmare casually, feeling the way the familiar weight in his hands

shifts.

They come at him again but he's ready and prepared for their weight this time. While the one with only a stick bears down against Nightmare, the other goes wide, attempting to come at Sapnap from the side. With no other option, Sapnap lets the stick ram him in the shoulder so he can block the sharp blade of the spear. The pole comes down hard enough that he wouldn't be surprised if it fractured his collarbone and he nearly bites through his tongue to avoid yelping in pain. His focus is on using Nightmare to catch the spear and angle it away from him with an ugly screech of scraping edges. He shifts on his feet, building momentum with a spin that ends with him slamming Nightmare's pommel into the guard's ribs; he hears a sickening crack and a wheezing cry, but doesn't have time to really take it in before he's being bowled backward by a punch to the face that sends him to the floor.

He doesn't let himself sprawl. He rolls with it, goes head over heels but ends up able to bounce back up a few feet away, wincing as he works his jaw back into place and gets back into stance.

The one guard holds his ribs with one arm and his spear in the other. Next to him, his partner is uninjured but has only his pole. Not great odds, but Sapnap has faced worse.

He finds George out of the corner of his eye; he's collected the broken spearhead and is using it to roughly saw through the ropes. Blood speckles the floor under him - he's sliced himself, no doubt.

"George!" He calls out, "Get XD and go, okay?"

"Stop trying to protect me and protect yourself!" George snaps back, ropes falling away, "You're two-v-one'ing right now and you need to focus!"

"He's three-v-one'ing, actually." Schlatt speaks up, sounding collected again. He steps between the guards, shoving one out of his way. His sword is one that, like Nightmare, Sapnap would recognize blind. It's *his* netherite sword. The one he gave away during the coup. He'd tried not to think about where it had ended up, the sword he's had at his side for years. He'd given it away because he'd thought it was the right thing to do at the time. Now, he's facing it. He wonders if it warms to Schlatt's hand.

"You know that sword has a name, right?" Sapnap rolls his shoulder out and steadily hides the sharp pain that prevents him from taking the full motion. Broken, then. "It's Schlong."

"Who names their sword *Schlong*?" Schlatt scoffs, sliding into a fighter's stance.

"A dumb kid." Sapnap shrugs his good shoulder and mirrors the position. "Either way, I don't appreciate you dirtying it up. It's not meant to be wielded by the likes of you."

"Come take it, then." Schlatt smiles and it isn't pretty. "Take it from me. I'm waiting."

On any usual day, Sapnap's confident that he'd be able to take all three of them. He'd have no problem fighting all three at once. But this isn't a usual day. This is a *bad* day, actually. He isn't even sure he'd be able to take Schlatt on his own, let alone with two burly fuckers bracketing him in.

Not that he has much of a choice.

Netherite on netherite offers a different sort of sound than netherite on any other sort of material. The singing that the swords do in battle are made audible when they clash and the ringing is near deafening from up close, making Sapnap's ears pulse. He recognizes the hum as Schlong but it's warped, a familiar harmony buried in an unfamiliar tune.

“You’re strong.” Schlatt grunts, face close to Sapnap’s with only their swords between them, “Real shame you turned your nose up at my offer. You coulda had so much; power, my dumbass assistant, everything you could have asked for.”

Sapnap, at the mention of Quackity, feels rage rattle his chest.

“Don’t fucking talk about him.” he hisses and shoves Schlatt away with a foot. Schlatt goes, but Sapnap takes a hardy wack to the ribs from the pole and just barely avoids getting stabbed by the spearhead, the smooth edge tearing into his thigh in a shallow slice. He falls back, readjusts his stance on Nightmare. He has to use both hands to lift it. His arms cry for a break but he ignores it.

“Talk about who?” Schlatt smiles, slow and sick, “Quackity?”

Sapnap tries to swing at him but the guards are there, blocking Nightmare in one direction and beaming him with the pole again from the other. This time, he definitely feels something shift in a way it isn’t supposed to. When he’s forced back again, he feels his leg buckle. Fuck. Fuck, okay. Maybe that slice wasn’t as shallow as he thought it had been.

“Don’t say his name.” Sapnap still grits out. “You don’t fucking deserve it.”

“What? Has he been filling your head with stories of big, bad Schlatt?” Schlatt scoffs, “Please. That viper has been happy to do as told for years. You think you know him because you, what, spent a couple months with him? Let me tell you, there’s as much blood staining him as staining me, he’s just whinier about it.”

Sapnap seethes, but he keeps the anger in. Instead of lashing out, he lets it fuel him, the adrenaline of his rage stilling his hands and steadyng his leg.

“I’ll say one thing about him.” Schlatt continues, having found a soft spot and wanting to bite into it viciously. “He sure begs real pretty.”

Sapnap attacks with a yell but Schlatt doesn’t flinch because his guards are on Sapnap immediately.

“I had him under me just earlier.” Schlatt continues, voice mocking as he raises it to a higher pitch, “*Please, sir!* My favorite words to hear from him.”

The words make Sapnap see red. The fresh bruises on Quackity’s face, the way his eyes had cut away when he’d said he was still supposed to be in Schlatt’s rooms. This fucking guy had been the one to do that, to make Quackity scared of so much. To hurt him. To tear him down enough that he thought Sapnap wouldn’t want him just because he asked for help once.

He feels a spear bite into him, break skin and slip through the flesh of his side before being roughly yanked back, worsening the wound.

Sapnap barely feels the pain, more focused on cutting down the guard with the pole to get to Schlatt.

“Sapnap!” George’s voice, crystal clear, breaks through the haze, “Calm down! He’s doing it on purpose, idiot!”

“He cried this time.” Schlatt speaks up again, “When I locked him in the room where he lost his useless wings, he cried and begged me not to. I wish I hadn’t had to, but he needed the punishment. The reminder that he was dirt when I found him and he’s still dirt now.”

“Sapnap, focus!”

“I wonder if he wished you were there to save him?” Schlatt ponders, “I think I heard your name, there, when I was workin’ him over. I bet he wished you’d been there to save him again. Too bad, huh? Too bad you were too fuckin’ weak to keep him safe. Did you promise you’d keep me away from him? Did you think you could keep what’s mine from me?”

“Sapnap, *don’t* -”

Sapnap doesn’t listen.

The next time the guards come for him, he lets the pole smash into his back so he can put all his power into cutting through the wood of the spear, sending the spearhead flying off across the room with a skitter of metal on stone flooring. He ducks through the gap between them, ending up with their backs to him. When he swings, it’s blindly but faithfully, and he’s rewarded with the dull *thunk* of Nightmare embedding itself in flesh. One of the guards *screams* and the other comes for Sapnap but he yanks Nightmare out without mercy and kicks the wounded guard into his partner, knocking them both to the ground in a clash of armor to match the skittering spearhead. He turns around, panting, to see Schlatt still smiling.

“I could recount every time I smacked him around, if you’d like that.” Schlatt says with pleasure, “Well, every time I remember. He needs to be taught so often, it blends together for me, now. And the best part? He’d always come crawlin’ back. A little hug, some nice words, maybe a peck on the forehead, and he was rarin’ to go do what I told him all over again.”

“Shut,” Sapnap flicks Nightmare, blood splattering the ground as it flings off the blade, “*up*.”

Nightmare hums, asking for more. Sapnap wants to give it to it. Schlatt lifts his - *Sapnap*’s fucking sword and motions him forward.

“Make me.” Schlatt bares his teeth at him, a facsimile of a grin, and Sapnap charges.

Their swords clash again, the song humming through the air, but Sapnap has only one goal in mind. He forces Schlatt’s hand down, Schlong sliding right off Nightmare with the momentum, and Sapnap takes the opportunity to ram his forehead into Schlatt’s face. There’s a *crunch* as Schlatt’s nose takes the full brunt of a demonic greeting, a sizzling as their flesh touches and Schlatt comes into contact with a pissed-off, unstable half-fire demon. Schlatt screeches, his hold on his sword loosening and Sapnap takes advantage. He doesn’t want to sword fight. He wants to feel Schlatt under him as Sapnap rips him apart. Both Nightmare and Schlong go sliding as he forces Schlatt’s grip open and then Sapnap is on him, bringing them both to the ground so he can wind up and deck Schlatt across the face.

Schlatt is a ram hybrid and his head is naturally hard, like a demon’s, so the headbutt doesn’t disorient him, but the broken nose does and Sapnap gets two really good, hard hooks in before Schlatt starts to fight back.

He goes for weak spots, a swing directly into the wound at Sapnap’s side. The pain just makes Sapnap angrier and he grabs Schlatt by the hands, lifting his head and smashing it into the ground as hard as he can. He feels Schlatt go limp under him and tries to do it again, wants to just crush his fucking skull -

But then there are hands on him and he’s being yanked off Schlatt and bodily hurled across the room.

He blinks up at the ceiling, panting, hands itching to punch again.

“You fuckin’ *bitch*,” Schlatt rages, voice echoing in the throne room. Sapnap turns his head, sees the guards at Schlatt’s side, one helping him sit up and the other guarding them with a pole. Sapnap’s eyes drag to Nightmare and Schlong, both having slid across the floor closer to the throne. George is there, still dragging XD down the steps, struggling because of his own stature. Sapnap wonders how heavy an unconscious XD is, if divinity weighs them down or if their bones hollow when they are hallowed. His bet’s on XD being a heavy motherfucker because he was in the fire swamp. Dream had been hard to lift, too.

“You *stupid, basic little fuck*,” Schlatt hurls at him as he stumbles to his feet. Sapnap sees a pool of blood on the ground where Schlatt once lay, and his face is doing no better, gushing crimson from his nose and teeth. Sapnap’s body aches and thrums with pain as he rolls onto his stomach and forces himself onto his hands and knees.

“You *told* me to make you.” he grins, feral.

“I’m going to skin you alive.” Schlatt pulls a dagger from his belt, “One of you go get my fucking sword, and the other one go *get him*.”

“Wait!” A new voice joins the echo, familiar and panting, “Wait, just a minute!”

Sapnap pushes himself to his knees so he can look at the doorway with wide eyes. Karl and Quackity stand in the center, leaning on each other and panting as they catch their breath.

“Give us...” Karl holds up a hand, “Just a second! We just got here!”

“Karl?” George stops dragging XD down the stairs, “*Quackity?*”

“H-hi, George.” Quackity waves weakly, “Sorry for betraying you a few days ago. I promise not to do it again.”

“What,” Schlatt cuts in, voice soft and dangerous, “Are you doing out of my room, honeybunch? I told you to sit and stay.”

“Don’t call me that.” Quackity stands up straight, shoulders rolling back. “And don’t fucking order me around. I’m not a fucking dog.”

“Oh, you wanna get brave again?” Schlatt motions and one of the guards hands him a pole, splintered at the end from Nightmare’s kiss. He points it at Quackity. “Remember what happened last time you tried to get smart? Was that not enough?”

“You won’t ever do that again.” Quackity snaps, “Never.”

“Oh, yes, I will.” Schlatt slams the butt of the pole on the ground, violence in every inch of movement, “I’m gonna do so much fuckin’ worse when we’re done here, sweetheart. I’m going to hack your wings off and hang them above *my* throne for the world to see, do you fuckin’ hear me?”

Quackity flinches but Sapnap watches Karl grab his hand.

“You won’t.” Karl says, like it’s as simple as that. Like, because he said it, it will never come to pass. Sapnap believes him, and Quackity must, too, because he straightens up again. “You’re a coward, Schlatt. You’re a coward and a weak piece of shit, and we’re stopping you now.”

“A coward?” Schlatt laughs, wet from blood that he then spits onto the floor, “*Weak?* I’ll show you

weak.”

“Don’t touch them.” Sapnap wobbles to his feet, fists clenching as he focuses on standing. It takes more energy than he’d like to admit but he does it. “You *won’t* touch them.”

“What, and you’re gonna stop me?” Schlatt glowers, “You can barely stand!”

“I can stand.” Sapnap plants his feet more firmly and then takes a step. “I don’t need to stand, though. I don’t need my sword, either of them. I could take you down with a hand tied behind my back.”

“Or a hole in your side, huh?” Schlatt sneers, “You’re pathetic, knight.”

“*You’re* pathetic!” Karl smacks right back, “You’re dumb mind games won’t work anymore, Schlatt. You’re weak and *stupid* and -”

“Shut up!” Schlatt screams, “What are you even *doing here!*? Who let you back *in!*? You’re just a stupid fucking *librarian!*”

“Well, this *librarian*,” Karl steps in front of Quackity and points at his own chest, “Saved *both* of his boyfriend-adjacent persons from *your* stupid clutches after getting back into *your* stupid castle, past *your* stupid guards and through *your* stupid defenses. So *which* of us is the stupid one, here, Schlatt, because it seems like I’m doin’ great and *you’ve* got a broken nose, no sword, and some guards fighting with sticks.”

The rage on Schlatt’s face would be funny, were it directed elsewhere. But it’s directed at Karl, who Sapnap *knows* can’t back up his words with weapons.

“I’m going to ram one of these sticks down your throat all the way through you and then make these two carry you around on it like prey from a hunt while you die slowly.” Schlatt says, deadly serious, and Sapnap forces his legs to work. He treks his way between them, breaking Schlatt’s immediate line of sight so he has to look at Sapnap, instead.

“Don’t touch them.” He repeats.

“Get me my sword.” Schlatt pushes one of the guards, who is now sans pole.

“Those are my swords now.” George cuts in. When Sapnap looks, he’s managed to drag XD down the steps, finally, and lean him up against the far wall. Schlong has been hung on his belt and Nightmare is in his hand, his stance defensive.

George is not a talented swordsman, but he is a proficient one. Nightmare is a danger in his hands - and not only to himself, luckily.

“I said *get me my sword!*” Schlatt snarls and shoves at the hesitating guard again. Both guards start moving, heading for George, and Sapnap doesn’t even have to turn and ask. Both Karl and Quackity race to his side, closer than the guards and Schlatt.

“I’ll watch over XD.” Karl promises, “You two - do you.”

“I know you probably don’t trust me right now -” Quackity turns to George nervously but George is already shoving Schlong into his hands.

“Shut up, fight the big guys, we’ll work it out later!”

Sapnap knows that they'll be okay. All of them are smart and capable despite how they tend to act when he's around to baby them, and if George and Quackity stick together and protect each other, Sapnap has no doubt they'll win this and keep both Karl and XD safe.

With that thought in mind, he looks back to Schlatt. Bloodied, only a dagger in hand, face a mask of ugly rage.

"Just us." Sapnap starts to walk toward Schlatt, purpose in his strides, "You and me."

"You wouldn't hurt a defenseless ram, would ya?" Schlatt taunts.

"Yes, I would." Sapnap says pleasantly and dives as soon as he gets close enough. He knocks the dagger out of the way, wrestling Schlatt to the ground again. Schlatt manages to turn them over and bring a fist into a glancing blow across Sapnap's cheek, but Sapnap twists out from under him and catches him in the throat. He watches Schlatt's eyes go wide and watery as he tries to breathe and can't. Still, Schlatt manages to catch him in his wound again, fingers digging in and making Sapnap scream. He arches away, falling back with movements purely instinctive, attempting to escape the pain and Schlatt takes the opportunity.

Schlatt bolts, swiping the dagger back up as he goes.

Sapnap watches him sprint towards his friends and his heart leaps into his throat, a terror so profound that it leaves him gasping as he forces himself up and staggers after him with a hand pressed to his side, a warning tangled in his throat. But it isn't the others that Schlatt is running for.

It's the throne.

"All of you," He pants, dagger pointed outwards, a rabid dog baring its teeth for one final stand "All of you, *weak*. Unable to comprehend what true power is. This country needs a true king, and when all the fucking dust settles, that's going to be *me*. The emperor of this great nation to be, leading it into a new era, with all the power of the throne finally, *finally*, being used to its full potential. All I need is a sacrifice. And if the prince won't do, then, well," a grin, half-deranged, spreads across his face, and his eyes land on Quackity.

Karl chokes out a denial, his fingers finding and tightening around Quackity's wrist. A fist of fear takes hold of Sapnap's heart.

"I brought my own."

He takes a step back and they watch in horror as Schlatt does the unthinkable and places his hands on the throne's armrests. The moment breaks and Sapnap stumbles forward, hand half-raised as far as his body will let him extend it, the word "No," halfway out of his lips as Schlatt, with a cruel and triumphant grin, lowers himself onto the throne.

The blast of heat that hits them then scorches even Sapnap. The guards are blown back toward the open door and don't hesitate to both army-crawl right out of the throne room. George throws himself over the still motionless corpse of XD as if that would do anything to protect him. Karl drags Quackity down and the three of them brace over XD, their hair and clothes ruffling and flapping in the heatwave. It feels like the fire swamp, but a hundred times warmer. A thousand. In the stifling air, wailing begins; almost child-like, a shrill whine that carries all the way to them and echoes in their ears. There is the thick bubble of magma, and even a familiar rattle of skeletons and snort of pigs. It smells like sulphur and brimstone. It *reeks* of fear.

Sapnap is the first to recover, pulling himself forward despite the almost overpowering smell.

When he lifts his head, it's to see Schlatt, still sitting on the throne. He does not look victorious anymore. He simply looks terrified.

Hovering in front of him is XD. Except it isn't just XD, not anymore. The green cloak stretches out, ripples, dancing like a rustling forest in the air, shifting hues almost like the passing of the sun. From his back, six wings unfurl, each over six feet long, and each the color of quartz, shining and brilliant. Save, that is, for those that stretch towards the ground; those beautiful feathers trail through the viscera that was left by Sapnap's fight and speckle with blood, red soaking into the edges of white and turning those wings hues of pink. For Sapnap's part, he is caught off to the side, just able to see the flash of the mask, the crossed-out eyes, the false upturned smile. XD is hallowed, haloed now, bright wheels turning around his head in an interlocking and floating ring. Divinity crackles in the air, static before a storm. Each of those wheels has eyes, all a sharp, undulating green. All of them have turned to Schlatt, and all of them bear the same cold indifference.

"That is not yours," and oh, that is the voice that could shake mountains, could topple gods, *has* toppled one. **"What right have you to claim this power?"**

Ichor drips from XD's words, and in its wake, Schlatt trembles. So, too, does Sapnap.

"I—" He starts, "I—"

"You," XD intones, **"have been presumptuous. You will pay the price for your insolence."**

"But I," Schlatt stammers; all of that bravado is gone now, lost to the heat and the terror of something beyond mortal comprehension, "I brought a sacrifice! I brought one!"

It is almost childlike, how he points to Quackity, like a toddler shifting the blame. And for all that Karl pushes Quackity behind him, how Quackity's face falls into something like acceptance, XD does not turn. George watches the exchange with glassy eyes, reaching desperately for a figure he can't touch.

"You love none but yourself," XD says, coldly, and Schlatt's eyes widen, yellow slits an explosion of fear, mouth opening to protest his sentence, and then there is a scream, high and piercing and pained and then -

And then, Schlatt is gone. The heat vanishes in a vacuum, all at once, pulled out of the air in a breath. The smell of sulphur is gone, but the fear remains.

"The fuck," Quackity says, the first of all of them to regain any ability to speak after a long moment, "The fuck? Where the fuck did he go?"

"The Nether," George murmurs, swaying as he gets to his feet, his face pink from the scalding air, "It's the domain of the throne. XD told me."

Sapnap does not see XD turn, but the next time he looks up, the being is facing them.

Though the halos disappear, his mask merely gazes down on them all, a monolith. There is nothing human there even without the eyes and burning wheels. Sapnap can see no part of his friend buried deep in this unearthly thing.

He lurches toward the others, finding George's grasping hands with his own. Karl and Quackity are still on the ground, kneeling over the space where the body they'd protected once was.

“XD?” George says, hesitant, and Sapnap lets his friend lean on him; all of them exhausted, drained. But Sapnap has a sinking sensation that this is not the end. “XD, you can come down now. It’s over. Schlatt’s gone.”

XD does not reply. Barely gives any indication that he has heard them, until he holds out one gloved hand and says, still in that ringing tone, “**George.**”

Sapnap feels George stiffen at his side and any fragile relief begins to curdle in his stomach, deep in the depths of his heart.

“Come down, XD.”

“**George,**” XD says again, “**You know what must be done.**”

“*No,*” George says, fierce. He holds onto Sapnap tightly and pushes him behind him protectively. Sapnap is too weak with shock to stop him.

“**George -**”

“I said *no*, XD! You said you wouldn’t force me! I don’t want this! I don’t want the throne! It can’t have us!”

“**It is your fate. Your birthright. Come and claim what you were always meant to be.**”

“I won’t!” George says, his face screwed up, “I won’t! You promised me! You said you wanted me to be happy!”

“I -” XD hesitates, for just a moment. Green fabric tendrils out from the edges of his cloak, floating and weaving in the air. “**I do, George. But you have returned to the throne. To me. It is time for you to accept it.**”

Within the blink of an eye, that emerald tendril shoots forward, wrapping around George’s wrist and yanking him forward in a jerk of movement. Instinct is the only thing that saves him - Sapnap grabs him, pulls him back with a jerk. He reaches back, one-handed, and one of the others understands without words. A hilt is placed in his hand and he swings, lets Nightmare slice clean through the fabric. Around George’s wrist, it flutters and curls into nothing but dust. The ragged edge of the fabric smooths itself over a moment later, no worse for the wear. Sapnap raises his sword.

“He said *no*, XD.” Sapnap says, then swallows, “Dream -”

XD, previously unmoving, rears back, his wings flaring outwards in rage.

“**DO NOT SPEAK THAT NAME! YOU ABANDONED HIM!**” He roars, the timbre of his voice shaking the very foundations of the throne room. George stumbles into Sapnap, unbalanced, hitting his injured arm, and Sapnap flinches. Behind them, Karl and Quackity cling onto each other as dust rains from the ceiling, “**YOU ABANDONED YOUR DUTY!**”

“I did,” George says, tears in his eyes, trying to go forward on instinct even as Sapnap holds him back, “I did, XD. But you know why. You *know.*”

“**You abandoned your duty,**” XD repeats, and though his voice is quieter, it still shakes with rage, still ripples through the air with a command that should not be possible. It is a god’s voice. There is nothing of Dream there, “**But I will not abandon mine.**”

A sword shimmers into existence in his hand. It is not wooden; it does not look like any weapon Sapnap has ever seen. It shimmers in the same way that enchantments do, but it is made of that magenta light, rather than coating something else. It is wholly magic.

“**There need not be bloodshed,**” XD says; a final warning.

“You *promised*,” George insists.

The lines of his cloak reach for George again, but Sapnap is faster this time. He sweeps Nightmare through the air, each of those incandescent ribbons falling to the floor and turning to dust. He bares his teeth at the eldritch being that might have once been his best friend, and holds his weak arm over George.

“If you want him,” He snarls, “Come and fucking claim him, asshole.”

It is a challenge that he cannot hope to win. But he hopes George will run all the same as he manages to put space between him and XD and the other three, enough for them to follow the wall to the grand doorway.

Magic meets determination in a crack of thunder, an ear-splitting shriek of magic against metal, the sound sinking deep into his bones and resounding there, shaking him to his very core. He can barely move; he feels like his ears are bleeding. Still, he pushes up and forward, meeting XD’s second swing with Nightmare skittering against the shimmering blade. He remembers the last time he fought XD; how the other hesitated, how the part of Dream that was still there, still loved him, stopped and put down his sword. There is none of that hesitation now.

XD, in all his glory, propels himself towards Sapnap, who is at an immediate disadvantage. XD can fly, is flying, wings great and terrible, and Sapnap is bound to the earth. XD flies up and up, and Sapnap knows he’s about to divebomb. He can make out those twisting motions, spent enough time hunting and in the aviary to know the patterns of attack, to know that a bird of prey is fastest when it is falling. Still, he isn’t the only one with something other-worldly about him.

XD barrels towards him with the speed of a falcon and the viciousness of one too, a whirlwind of green cloak and white feathers. The wings of XD’s right side, all three of them, impact Sapnap with the strength of an avalanche. He’s knocked backward, only barely staying on his feet but that doesn’t matter.

In his wake, XD shrieks. Through the smoke, Sapnap can see the blackened feathers, wingtips turned into ash upon contact with his skin. XD crashes into the floor, a wounded bird, his right-hand wings hanging limply downwards with many of the most prominent wings now burnt and ashy.

He doesn’t need to beat XD. He just has to hold him off. But George - stupid, stubborn, loyal George - isn’t running. And neither are Karl or Quackity.

XD gets to his feet, his wings tucked in tight to his back. He begins a slow stalk forward, sword glimmering in his hand. He does not need to run; they both know that this is inevitable, whichever outcome remains. Sapnap won’t move and XD won’t stop.

“Q,” Sapnap’s breath rattles through his lungs. Fuck, his side hurts; actually most of him hurts, but that hasn’t stopped him before and it isn’t gonna stop him now, “Q, Karl, get George and -”

“No.” Quackity says, firm, “No. Don’t you get it, you fucking idiot?”

“We’re not going anywhere,” Karl adds.

George nods, eyes bright with tears and determination. “None of us.”

“It wants you!” Sapnap says desperately but he can’t afford to take his eyes off of XD. The godling is only ten paces away. Eight. Six. “He wants you; that’s not the same XD as before, George! He doesn’t care!”

“He does!” George protests, and then, quieter, with a tinge of wonder, “Or at least… A part of him does.”

Sapnap doesn’t have time to react to whatever the fuck George is talking about now, as the enchanted sword swings downward. He only just dives out of the way in time, the sound of feet scattering behind him as the others mirror him. The sound of the enchanted blade hitting the marble floor sounds like shattering glass, sharp shards of stone shooting upwards.

He doesn’t really hear it though, because in that moment, George shouts, “*Dream!*”

XD pulls his sword from the marble, a screeching shriek, and turns to George. Sapnap’s heart stutters, freezes.

“**You abandoned him,**” XD says. “**I am what is left. I am all that is left.**”

“No,” George insists, “You said he’s still there. Still here. So I know he can hear me. Dream! Are you listening!?”

Sapnap understands all at once. He opens his mouth, and he calls out to his best friend, “*Dream!*”

It is minor. Almost minuscule. But Sapnap knows - he *knows* - that XD flinches. Or at least, the shoulders under the cloak, supporting the wings, tighten, and he brings his sword up half a second slower than before.

Sapnap, for all that his collarbone and ribs are probably fractured, for all that there is blood dripping from the wounds in his side and in his thigh, for all that his world is spinning around him, he knows Dream. Fought beside and against him for years, he would know the way Dream fights better than he knows his own.

And the way that XD swings the sword in his hand, the stance that he has now that he is confined to the ground, no longer floating; that is all Dream.

Sapnap stares down his opponent, swaying on his feet. The mask stares back.

“*Dream,*” He says again, “*Dream, this isn’t you. Come on.*”

When their swords meet, it’s like they’re back in the dusty courtyard, wild grins on their faces as they danced around each other at fourteen, seventeen, twenty.

“**I am not him.**”

“Yes, you are!” George shouts, “You are! You know us!”

“**I know you left him,**” XD snarls, “**Left me.**”

“We did,” Sapnap says, heart in his throat, drowning in unshed tears, “We did, Dream, and I’m so sorry.” XD’s sword sweeps close to him and Sapnap parries, twists; it’s a maneuver Dream taught him on a warm summer’s day, a maneuver perfected through hours and hours on the field, working together.

“I’m sorry,” He chokes out, stumbling backward, “But we’re here now, Dream. We came to save you.”

“**That man is dead,**” XD says, and drives his sword up. If Sapnap hadn’t moved just a moment prior, he would have been speared through the gut.

“No,” Sapnap insists, “No. I mourned you once. I won’t do it again, Dream.”

The breath is driven from Sapnap’s lungs so suddenly he would be gasping, if he had breath left to do so. He reels back from the force of a blow that he didn’t even see coming. It’s only when he stumbles, falls, his back colliding painfully with the marble of the wall that he realizes that XD must have hit him with the hilt of the sword. His ribs are screaming in pain and getting up already feels impossible. He stretches out his fingers, but Nightmare has skittered away, just out of his reach.

Karl shouts; he can hear Quackity moving, a flash of that beanie before it is forced away and the tip of XD’s sword is pressed to his throat.

“*XD, stop!*” Karl yells, “Don’t -”

“*Silence.*” XD snaps and Karl’s voice disappears.

“Dream,” Sapnap swallows, “Dream, come on, man. You know me. You *know* me.”

XD is silent.

“You’re my best friend,” Sapnap says, “You’re my *brother*, Dream. You couldn’t kill me before. I know you won’t now.”

Something...*spasms* across XD. It isn’t quite a flinch, or a falter, but it is something. His head tilts imperceptibly, his sword drops a half-inch; the tension in his shoulders hikes up and there is the smallest tremble to his hands.

“We’ve been here before,” Sapnap continues, “The first time you knocked me down, remember? I had the bruises for a week, but I got you back. I helped you up, and you had the biggest smile. I know you remember that, Dream.”

XD’s wings, ruined and ashen, flare out again.

“Stop this. You need not die. The king must simply take his throne.”

“We promised, Dream,” Sapnap says, and his voice comes out choked; he can no longer hold back his tears. He’s too weak for his temperature to keep up, he’s lost too much blood. They don’t steam because he’s growing colder and colder by the minute. Sapnap is left defenseless, looking into the mask of a godling he knows is his best friend.

“We promised we would never let it take him. *You* promised. If you have to kill me to come back, then do it, but you have to remember that. You have to remember that you swore you’d never let this happen to George.”

The sword at his throat digs in. Sapnap feels it pierce flesh and he closes his eyes, fists going limp.

“**Pandas...**” XD says, sounding - *so* lost. “Pandas, what...”

Sapnap’s eyes snap open, finding XD’s mask as a soft *chink* sounds, so soft he almost misses it.

There, at the midway of the bottom of the mask, a small crack has formed.

“Dream? Sapnap asks, voice fragile, “Dream, can you hear me? Do you?”

The sword falls away. As it does, it disintegrates. XD takes a stumbling step back.

“Dream,” George says and Sapnap watches the way George’s voice alone is enough to electrify XD. It makes him turn and face the one he did all of this for.

“George.” XD reaches out and then stops, brings his hands back to himself. “I scared you again, didn’t I?”

“Yes.” George nods. His face is stained with tears and dust from the settling castle, bruised from the treatment of the last few days. “You did.”

“I keep doing that, don’t I?” XD asks, sounding close to tears, himself. Sapnap’s heart breaks at the tremble in *Dream*’s voice. He never could handle when either of them cried.

“Yes, you do.” George agrees, wiping at his face. “Are you better now?”

“No.” XD presses a palm to his chest. “Even now, I want you on the throne. I want you to sit and be with me forever. I hurt Sapnap. I...”

“I *will* be with you forever.” George steps closer and XD steps back. “XD, please. I will. Just not on the throne. And Sapnap...”

“I’m okay.” Sapnap speaks up, voice catching. “I’m okay, XD. You didn’t hurt me that bad.”

“I...Why can’t I...You *left* him.” XD shakes his head. “You both left him. Left me. Why do I care about you so much!?”

“I’m sorry,” George offers his hands, “that I didn’t remember you. You took my memories away. But I’m back now. I’m going to rescue you.”

“I rescued myself.” XD snaps, curling in on himself. Magic statics across his form. The wings at his back shudder, and the feathers molt away into ash, primary by primary.

“No,” George smiles, sad. “You protected yourself. But you’re still stuck, aren’t you, Dream? With all that magic. You took it all so you could keep yourself safe, and keep us safe, right? But it’s still tethering you. You’re still trapped.”

“No.” XD says and it sounds like a lie.

“Come here, Dream.” George motions with his fingers.

“No.”

George smiles wider. “Dream. I want to hug you. Come here.”

“I’m dangerous! I’m dangerous, I might try to hurt you again!”

“You will never hurt me.” George says with confidence. “Now come here or I’ll come over there, idiot.”

XD, as if that was actually a threat, steps closer and closer until George can pull him into a hug. Sapnap watches, eyes blurry with tears. He feels a presence next to him, knows that it’s Quackity

and Karl who take both his hands, slowly helps him up from the ground. The three of them crowd together as Sapnap watches his best friends, helpless now and only able to trust that George knows what he's doing.

George hugs XD, dwarfed as he is by the floating cloak and tall figure.

Slowly, carefully, XD hugs him back.

"You can let go of the magic now." George says, just loud enough for Sapnap to hear. "We're here. We came for you."

"But - but how can I protect you, without it?"

"We can protect each other, us and Sapnap. Karl and Quackity."

"...you said you love me." XD shudders in George's arms. "You *said* you love *me*. Not him. You don't even remember him!"

"Of course, I love you." George scoffs. "How could I not? And if I love you, then I love him. Maybe I don't remember him, but he *is* you. Your heart is his as much as it's yours. It's mine, as much as mine is yours and his. You're Dream. You're *my* Dream."

"I'm not."

"Listen to me." George reaches up, holds XD's face in his hands, palms flat to the mask. "Are you hearing me? I'm here. I came to rescue you. I'm here to save you."

"George..."

"It's my turn and I finally did it. I found you, Dream. I found you."

George lifts himself onto his toes and presses a kiss to the painted mouth of XD's mask.

With a noise of pure magic, the mask *shatters*.

The force sends George flying backward, and even a few feet away, Sapnap is plastered to the wall behind him. It's a burst of light, a supernova, a star exploding into existence. It's like time itself splinters into shards of unreality, and for a moment all Sapnap can feel is overwhelming, all-encompassing heat. It is all tied up in the fear that it's got him, that he is as trapped as Dream was and that fear is utterly oppressive, unrelenting, until the pressure releases and he can breathe, bent over on the floor of the throne room.

When he looks up, it's - it's -

Constellation freckles over his nose, pale, almost pallid after so long under the mask, but it's the same patterns he remembers, even after all this time. Green eyes, bright, shining and shocked, flickering between him and George.

"*George...*" Dream says, smiling. It's his first word, George's name, in a voice that brings back so many emotions - both new and old. "George, you found me."

"Dream." George says, just as wondering. "*Dream.*"

Dream's arms reach out as George stumbles to his feet and reaches back and -

The throne alights with a low *boom*. Tendrils of light shoot from the brightness, straight for Dream.

They grab him at the ankles and *pull*. He goes down with a shout, hitting the ground and sliding back all in a second.

“No!” George screams, diving forward to catch Dream’s flailing hands. “No, no, no, not again, no!”

Sapnap moves out of instinct. That’s his best friend, his brother, and he is not letting him get away. Not this time. He is up and leaping forward, at George’s side, before his body even has time to realize it shouldn’t be moving.

Familiar hands grab at his own. Scars he remembers patching up, some he even remembers giving, albeit accidentally. Rough against his wrists, firm and strong.

“Hold on!” He shouts, as the throne gives another terrible tug and Dream slips backward with a cry of pain, eyes wide and horrified, “We’re not letting you go, hold on!”

It drags them both with him, both Sapnap and George holding on for dear life and pulling with all of their strength, but it’s not enough. It won’t be enough.

Arms wrap around his waist. He glances down, recognizes their shape, how he fits into them like a puzzle piece.

“I’ve got you,” Quackity says, even as Sapnap feels his hands trembling, his grip is strong, fingers entangling in Sapnap’s shirt.

A hand fists itself into the back of his shirt, and he turns to see that Karl has a hand on each of them, gripping tight to both him and George.

“You’re not going fuckin’ anywhere,” He says, gritting his teeth against the immense pull of the throne, “Any of you.”

“We can’t -” Sapnap groans as he’s pulled forward again, and Dream yelps in pain, “We have to break its hold, we can’t hold on forever!”

“No,” says a new voice, “No, but we can hold it for a little while longer.”

“Incoming, Big Q!”

For all that Tubbo and Tommy storm into the throne room in a whirlwind of shouting and adrenaline, the way they grab onto Quackity is nothing short of gentle. They dig in their heels, Tubbo an octopus at his legs, Ranboo holding them both with separate hands on their collars, Tommy straining at Karl’s cloak; “What the fuck is this made of, it’s awful, what the fuck is this color -”

“Not the *time*, Tommy!” Wilbur grabs onto Sapnap’s arm, reinforcing the grip that he has on Dream.

“Oh, what the *hell* is this?” There is the sound of steel sliding through stone, a screech that wails out in the throne room and Wilbur tightens his grip, wincing.

“Fucking hell, Techno -” He says, “Do you have to do that right next to me?”

“Do you want an anchor or not?” Techno says, and curls his hand around the hilt of his sword, sunk into the floor, and the other on Wilbur.

“You -” George says, panting from exertion, “You’re -”

“Thank us later, Gogy,” Tommy says, “And Dream, don’t you dare think about getting away this time! You still owe me a duel!”

Even with all the terror in his eyes, the strain as the throne pulls him one way and a rag-tag group of family, friends, and rivals pulls him another, there is a flash of relieved amusement across Dream’s face.

“Hi, Tommy.” He says, voice a rasp, “Long time no see.”

“Talk about *no see*, I remember *seeing* you just fine when Wilbur was doin’ the tango with that fancy seat!” Tommy starts, “We are gonna *talk* about that shit over crossed blades, my man, aren’t we?”

“S-sure,” Dream agrees, “Anything you want.”

“Anything? Sounds a bit dangerous to promise, Big D,” Tommy grins, wicked, before straining back and they all strain with him. Ever so slightly, Dream is pulled forward, away from the throne. The pain on his face tells Sapnap it isn’t a good feeling, being yanked so hard in both directions.

“Don’t,” Dream says, through gritted teeth and obvious pain, “Don’t call me that, I told you -”

“Well, what if that’s what I *want* -”

“D-Dream, do you trust me?” George cuts in.

“What?”

“I said, do you trust me?”

Dream blinks. “Of course I do. More than anything.”

“Okay.” George nods, “Then let me go.”

“*What!?*” Sapnap, and a number of other people, yell.

“Grab Sapnap,” George hands Dream off to Sapnap completely. Almost immediately, the entire group slips up and loses a few feet.

“*George!*” Sapnap groans, “Gods, you and your *ideas* -”

“Trust me!” George shouts back and then fights his way out of the mess. Everyone shifts and rearranges for him, most hands coming now to grab at Sapnap. Someone digs into his shoulders, puts so much pressure on his collarbone that Sapnap has to blink back tears.

“Don’t cry, Pandas.” Dream gasps in pain, “*Fuck*, you know I’m a sympathy crier, don’t -”

“I’m not crying about *you*, idiot!” Sapnap lies.

“It’s okay.” Dream smiles. It’s his smile - not that fucking mask, it’s *his* smile. It makes Sapnap have to blink even harder. “It’s okay, Pandas. You came back. You didn’t forget. You never forgot. That’s all I needed to know.”

“Shut the fuck up,” Sapnap hisses, “God, I didn’t miss all your yapping, that’s for fucking sure.”

“I missed you!” Dream shoves his face into the ground as he tries to pull himself closer. “I missed you a whole lot. It was lonely as fuck. Everything was hot and it reminded me of how our room would get when you were mad at me.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, my temperature control is amazing.”

“S-sure, it is,” Dream nods quickly, “Just - fuck, just, if I end up -”

“George!” Sapnap raises his voice, “He’s getting self-sacrificial, George, *hurry the fuck up!*”

Dream laughs and it sounds like a sob.

“Coming!” George yells back, “Sorry, I’m coming! Hold on, Dream, this rescue party is still on!”

“A party?” Dream glances over his shoulder and Sapnap does too, sees that George is standing and has found Nightmare, “I would have worn a better dress.”

“You look beautiful in anything, darling,” Sapnap readjusts his grip, fingers so tight around Dream’s wrists he thinks he might accidentally break them soon.

“I thought I was darling?” Karl complains tightly, “Do you call all the boys darling, Sapnap?”

“Only the pretty ones.” Sapnap laughs breathlessly. It’s either that or sob with pain.

“Where does angel fall into this?” Quackity speaks up, reaching out to wrap his hands above Sapnap’s on Dream’s arms.

“That’s what I call the smart ones.”

“Is this what the last few months was like?” Wilbur says, disgusted, “For fuck’s sake, it’s just all five of you flirting?”

“Well, XD wouldn’t play along,” Karl responds, “So it was, unfortunately, just the four of us. If I’d known he was that cute under the mask, I would have tried harder!”

“Two outta four isn’t a bad haul,” Dream grins, sharp, even with his voice strained, “That’s fifty percent!”

“Yeah, I’m happy with what I got.” Karl admits, readjusting his grip on Sapnap.

“That’s so sweet,” Sapnap squeezes his eyes shut, tears now flowing freely, “Stop! My eyes, you fuckers!”

“This is really romantic!” Technoblade says, sounding both deadpan and choked up.

“I’m going to be sick,” Tubbo complains, “They’re all *soppy*, Tommy, what the fuck, man!”

“Now you know how I feel when you an’ tall man over here start talking about your *upcoming nuptials!*”

“Those are *years* away, first of all -”

“George, be careful!” Karl breaks in, voice a little panicked, “Please don’t let the glowing throne eat you!”

Sapnap finds George and is horrified to see he’s climbed up to the throne, Nightmare in hand.

“I won’t!” He says, like it’s something he could fucking stop.

“George, get away from there!” Dream yells desperately, “George!”

None of them can do anything, Sapnap can’t let Dream go and the others are only just keeping him away.

“Hush, I’m trying to think of a badass one-liner!” George says as he raises Nightmare. “Uh, okay, how about - Hey! Why don’t you *take a seat!*?”

“That was fucking awful!”

“Shut the fuck up, Sapnap!” George snaps and then plunges Nightmare directly into the bright, pulsing ball of magic taking up the seat of the throne.

The hold on Dream goes slack immediately. Sapnap and the others behind him, unprepared for the loss of tension, end up yanking Dream into them as they all fall backward in a giant, painful pile of wounds, armor and weapons.

“George!” Sapnap starts to struggle out of the bodies as a high-pitched sound fills the room, sort of like if two netherite blades coming together met a very angry organist. He manages to sit up, Dream on top of him and weakly attempting to pull himself up, too.

When Sapnap gets eyes on him, George is standing over the throne, sword embedded in the seat, the light slowly going dim as Nightmare’s enchantments all pulse and fizzle out as one across the blade in waves of purple light.

“I think it’s killing it!” George says excitedly.

“Those enchantments are so expensive...” Sapnap hears Wilbur say.

“I’ll re-enchant it for the low, low cost of it saving our lives.” Karl promises.

“You can enchant?”

“I told you, I was severely disadvantaged during this journey!” Karl pats Sapnap’s shoulder and then meekly apologizes as Sapnap nearly collapses under the waves of agony. “Whoops, sorry!”

“George.” Dream finally succeeds in pulling himself to his feet, Sapnap pushing him up in the final step so he can stand.

Dream has changed; his stance is more defensive, his frame smaller from what Sapnap can only assume is the months he spent without proper nutrition. There is a pang in his chest which has nothing to do with how his ribs hurt. There are scars that Sapnap doesn’t remember on his arms, rips in a normally impeccable outfit. His hair is longer, and his face, despite how it has thinned, has filled out. He looks older than he was just a few months ago.

But when he looks at George, his whole face lights up. Despite everything, it’s still him.

George waits for the glow and shrieking to finally die - Nightmare gives one last sizzle as the last of its enchantments go toward powering the death of the throne. When he turns around, yanking Nightmare free as he does, Sapnap has what one might call a vision. George as king, loyal sword at his side. He stands tall, in front of the smoking throne, dirty and tear-stained and victorious.

And then his eyes fall on Dream and his face, the same way Dream’s did, lights up.

“Dream.” he lets go of Nightmare, letting it clatter to the dias at his feet. “Dream. Dream! We did it!”

“George!” Dream laughs, choked up, “You saved me.”

“Gag.” someone behind Sapnap says. He thinks it was Ranboo.

Sapnap sees the instinct appear in George’s eyes and recognizes it for what it is.

“George, no!” he tries but it’s too late. Whatever vision of a mature, serious George he may have hallucinated is promptly shattered as George takes a running leap off the dias straight at Dream.

As always, Dream doesn’t hesitate to open his arms and catch him. The problem is that, this time, he’s *weak* from the *lost divinity*. Sapnap uses Karl’s shoulder to haul himself up so he can brace Dream just in time. None of them go down, through Sapnap’s sheer force of will and the fact that Karl and Quackity catch on quick enough to stabilize him when he buckles under Dream and George’s weight.

“You *idiot!*” Sapnap immediately yells, but George just shoves at his face from his place in Dream’s arms.

“Shut up, shut up, he caught me! He caught me!”

“We caught you, you asshole!”

“Get away, I’m going to kiss the love of my life and you’re in our *space* -”

“Kiss me?” Dream grins, big and bright, “Love of your life? You remember I’m your -”

“Kiss you, love of my life, yes, yes, I remember, I remembered as soon as you let the stupid *fucking* magic that *took my memories* go, you *fucking* idiot, shut *up*, you *stupid* -” George grabs Dream’s face and kisses him. To most people, it would probably be very moving and romantic. To Sapnap, it’s his brother kissing his other brother.

“My eyes!” Sapnap shrieks and covers his eyes, reeling back as Karl and Quackity go with him, laughing hysterically.

“You’re being a kid about this.” Karl teases, turning Sapnap away from the appalling sight of Dream and George reuniting and pulling his hands from his face. “They’re just *kissing*.”

“It’s gross.” Sapnap groans, “They do it *all the time*, you have *no idea*.”

“They’ve been separated a while, let’s give them a break this one time.” Quackity carefully pushes his hands into his pockets. “Are you two okay? Any glaring injuries?”

“I’m fine.” Karl says immediately and looks at Sapnap.

“I’ll survive.” Sapnap nods.

There is a noise from behind them all, and Sapnap raises an eyebrow, unimpressed.

The noise is Technoblade pulling his sword from the floor.

“Sorry to interrupt ya’ll’s moment. We’re just gonna go,” Technoblade is the one to speak, and Sapnap can hear the amusement in his voice even as he sweeps away, pulling Ranboo and Tubbo with him.

"This isn't over just because the throne is gone." Wilbur warns, a hand over Tommy's eyes, who is pretending to gag even as his brother drags him away. Tubbo and Ranboo are already ribbing each other as the whole group is towed away by Techno, who's already calling loudly for someone to announce Schlatt's death.

Sapnap waits for them to disappear out of the room before he turns to Quackity. "What about you, Q? Are you alright...with Schlatt...?"

"Whatever, man." Quackity shrugs, "He was an asshole. He was gonna *sacrifice me to a big chair*. He...he hurt a lot of people. He deserved it."

Karl tugs at Quackity's sleeve until he lets him pull one hand out of his pockets and tangle their fingers together.

"It's okay to still be sad." Karl says seriously.

"Maybe." Quackity sucks in a hard breath and releases it slowly. Sapnap mentally counts to eleven with the exhale. "But I'm not. Not right now. Mostly, I'm just -" he cuts off, a little choked up, "I-I'm just glad you're both okay. Fuck. I'm so glad you're both okay."

When Karl tugs again, Quackity comes easily. Karl folds him into a hug, tucking him against his chest and squeezing like he'd like to never let go again. Karl turns his bright eyes to Sapnap - crystal clear, bright blue, as mesmerizing as the first time Sapnap ever saw them.

"Wanna hug?" He offers, and Sapnap knows he could say no and Karl would understand. It's that thought, that they'd let him say no, that makes him nod. Karl offers an arm and Sapnap lets himself be pulled in, too. Karl hugs him just as tight and Quackity shifts enough that he can look at Sapnap, dark eyes trusting and tired and - and happy. There's none of the cloud that Sapnap had always worried about, none of the hesitation when Quackity touches him.

"You're...you're cold." Quackity presses Sapnap's palm to his cheek. He's *warm* and Sapnap only barely resists the urge to press closer and bask in it. Now that Quackity mentions it, Sapnap is fucking freezing.

"As much as I appreciate the hugs," Sapnap says, putting his free hand to his side, "Does anyone have a healing pot?"

"Oh fuck," Quackity says, "Oh *fuck*, you're bleeding a lot."

"That'll be the stab wound," Sapnap says, even as his world tilts and he falls into Karl's side.

"Oh, no, you don't," Karl says, and shimmies around to get a free arm. He pulls a shimmering potion from his bag, the same place he's been keeping the invis pots from before in, "No one is allowed to die anymore, okay?"

"My hero," Sapnap says, and lets Quackity help keep him steady as he tilts his head back and swallows down the potion.

It tastes like magic. He can feel it take effect, his skin knitting together, his bones realigning, his blood starting to warm again. He's still exhausted and sore, but at least he isn't bleeding any more. It'll be one hell of a scar, but he finds he doesn't care much.

"Why didn't you say anything?" Karl frowns, stepping back to look Sapnap over, "Was it just your side? I've got more potions at home. We can stop by and -"

“Karl.” Sapnap smiles, leaning heavily on Quackity. “I’m okay. The potion helped.”

He’s got some natural healing to do, for sure, but - he’ll live.

“You’re *sure*, though? Because you *just* said you were okay and then you fainted.”

“I did *not* faint!”

“You definitely fainted.”

“I got dizzy, but I didn’t - I didn’t *faint*, Karl!”

“I *held you in my arms*, Sap, I think I’d know if you fainted!”

Quackity laughs, hiding his face in Sapnap’s shoulder. It’s still tinged with hysteria, but it sounds *happy*. It makes Sapnap feel floaty, like he could drift right up to the ceiling. His arm settles around Quackity’s waist, hugs him close again.

“Just.” Sapnap stops arguing, trying to stop smiling and failing. “Come here, Karl.”

“So you can hide more injuries?” Karl says sourly, but his lips are twitching.

“So I can reward my hero.” Sapnap tries to keep a straight face, but when Karl’s eyes go wide and his face goes pink, he can’t help but burst into laughter, motioning him closer. “Come here!”

“Sir, yes, sir.” Karl steps right up like he’s expecting a medal to be pinned to his chest. Sapnap just fists his collar, pulls him down the scant inches Karl has on him and lets their noses brush together.

“Thank you for the potion.” He says, “And coming to save us.”

“Thank you for trusting me.” Karl says right back, eyes finding Sapnap’s searchingly. Whatever he sees, it makes him grin, nose wrinkling.

“Oh my gods, just *kiss*,” Quackity orders, impatient, and it makes them both laugh. Sapnap tastes the joy when he listens and presses their lips together. Karl hums happily, one hand coming up to cup Sapnap’s jaw. It’s soft, comforting, playful when Sapnap tries to drop down and Karl follows him and Sapnap realizes he can make Karl chase him.

“Stop moving,” Karl eventually whines, “I’m enjoying my reward.”

“I think you might have another one waiting.” Sapnap can’t resist stealing one more peck before he sits back.

Karl’s eyes fall to Quackity’ softening. “Do I?”

“Ugh,” Quackity pulls a face, “You’re both being weird about this.”

“You don’t have to.” Karl says immediately. “We’re happy like this.”

“We are.” Sapnap nods, “No pressure.”

“*Stop*,” Quackity whines, squirming in Sapnap’s arms. “You’re making me *nervous*, now.”

“Nervous?” Karl presses his forehead to Quackity’s, “It’s just us, baby.”

“It’s *because* it’s you,” Quackity grumbles and then tilts his head up and kisses Karl, too. Karl isn’t

as aggressive as he was with Sapnap, letting Quackity lead. Quackity's hands are still on Sapnap. He feels them curl into his shirt, feels the way Quackity tenses and then relaxes, the way Karl leans in but doesn't crowd. Karl is the one to sit back this time, practically glowing. Quackity just looks dazed when he blinks his eyes open.

"Huh." Quackity lets his hands unclench from Sapnap's shirt, smoothing the material down nervously as he starts to go pink from his neck all the way up to his ears.

"You're blushing." Sapnap points out with a smirk, "Oooh, is Karl that good at kissing?"

"I'm *so* good at kissing." Karl brags. "You should kiss me again so I can prove it."

"It's my turn to kiss him." Quackity argues, voice high, "It's definitely my turn!"

"Guys, there's no need to fight, I'm always available for kisses."

"Yeah, Karl," Quackity flicks Karl's hand away from Sapnap's jaw and replaces it with his own, "You can kiss him *later*."

"That's not what I said -" Sapnap tries, but then Quackity is using feather-light fingers to turn him so they're facing each other and dropping a light kiss to his lips that shuts him right up. Like Karl, Sapnap lets Quackity decide how this goes. He's just happy to be here, in their arms. Quackity's lips are soft, his hand beginning to grow a little cooler as Sapnap heats up until they're the familiar, refreshingly cool touch that he thinks about so often.

When Sapnap sighs, Quackity smiles and the kiss breaks naturally.

"Stop." Sapnap says immediately.

"Stop what?"

"The smug fucking face. Shut it."

"No, no, keep going." Karl encourages, "In fact, if you two wanted to kiss again, I wouldn't complain."

"You're a fuckin' voyeur, that's why."

"Only for you two, baby," Karl flutters his lashes at Quackity and Sapnap hides his giggles in Quackity's beanie, pressing his face to the material until he can regain control.

"Are you three done?" George cuts in, breaking up their moment, "Any more sweet kisses to be exchanged before we move on?"

"You literally leapt into your returned lover's arms, George," Karl turns around, facing George with an eye roll, "We're *allowed* a few sweet nothings!"

"Sure, if they don't take *forever*."

"Don't test me, George," Sapnap points threateningly, "I've got a lot of resentment built up from walking in on you two all the time and two people to help me get revenge, now."

"Please don't." Dream says with a sigh.

"Speaking of," Quackity hesitates for a second, gathering his thoughts and coming up empty. He offers only, "What happens now?"

“I don’t care,” George says immediately, “I could not give less of a shit.”

“Me, too.”

“Me, three.”

“Bad and Phil will sort it out,” Sapnap says quietly, “They’ll think of something. They always do. Wilbur will finally get his fucking democracy he keeps banging on about.”

“Let’s *not* be here for that,” Quackity says, “I don’t think I could cope with Wilbur Soot in government all over again.”

“Oh, we are *gone*,” George says, a promise. “Tomorrow, if possible. They’ll want me to make a speech and I am so not doing that.”

“I want a farm!” Karl pipes up, and Dream dissolves into giggles, “Hey, what’s so funny, masked man?”

“One,” Dream says, between wheezes that are so familiar they ache in Sapnap’s newly repaired bones, “No more mask. And two, you’re a librarian, what are you going to do on a farm?”

“That’s exactly what I said!” Sapnap replies, “I swear to all the gods, any kind of future planning went out of the window while you were gone.”

Dream’s gaze turns soft, gentle, and he holds out a hand to Sapnap. He takes it immediately. Dream’s heartbeat thrums under his skin, a pulse that he will never ever get sick of.

“Hey, Sapnap,” Dream says, and even though they’ve already done this, Sapnap can feel the lump starting to rise again in his throat.

“Hey, Dream,” Sapnap says, and then Dream’s arms are around him; careful, his bones are still kind of piecing themselves back together, and both their shoulders are shaking but neither of them will say a word.

“You did such a good job,” Dream says, thumbing the tears away from Sapnap’s face once they break apart. His big hand settles on Sapnap’s head, a familiar *pat-pat* pattern that brings Sapnap to tears all over again. “You were all on your own, and you kept him safe. You did *so* good.”

“I wanted to come back,” Sapnap starts, hiccuping, “Dream, I’m so *sorry*,” but Dream shakes his head.

“I know. It’s okay. We can talk about it more later but... I know you wouldn’t have left me there. You’re okay, Sap. I don’t blame you,” He tilts his head, and then, with all the height that he possesses - a growth spurt when they were sixteen that left Sapnap trailing in the dust despite how he protested it - he presses a feather-light kiss to Sapnap’s hair, “I’m sorry, too. We should have told you about the throne. I’m sorry for leaving you behind.”

“You better be, asshole,” Sapnap bonks their foreheads together, “You’re not allowed to do that again, you hear me?”

“I hear you,” Dream says, laughing, “I hear you, Sap.”

“Good,” Sapnap says, and then, because if he says anything else sappy, he’s going to start crying again and he has cried far too much already today, “I should - You haven’t actually properly met them, this is -”

“Karl,” Dream finishes, nodding at each, “Quackity.”

“Hey, dude,” Karl raises a hand, while Quackity smiles, hesitant. “Heard a lot about you.”

“Only good things, right?” Dream asks.

“Eh,” Quackity shrugs, “Depends on your definition of ‘good.’”

Dream wraps his arms around his stomach and wheezes, loud and long. It’s like a glass of cool water on a summer’s day; all is right with the world, as long as Dream is laughing.

“I remember,” He says, once he’s composed himself again, “I remember most of what happened. When I was... When XD was with you guys. But I’m looking forward to getting to know you all properly. As me.”

“Me, too,” Quackity says, seriously, which is immediately mostly ruined as Karl slings an arm around his shoulders and grins at Dream.

“That’s good, because I’m going to be marrying your brother.”

The smile that spreads across Dream’s face as both Quackity and Sapnap choke on air is positively devilish.

“Well, that’s a new development,”

“Karl,” Sapnap says, his face burning as he drops it into his hands, “Let us have one day in this relationship before you propose. *Please*. You haven’t even asked either of us out properly, yet!”

Dream’s grin grows even wider. “One day? Yet?”

“Shut up,” Sapnap replies, muffled, “Shut up, I hate you. Go away.”

“Ouch,” Dream says, hand on his heart as he leans back into George, the motion so familiar that Sapnap can’t be mad at him for long, “Was he this grumpy the whole time I was gone?”

“Oh, you have no idea,” George butts in, “He needed to go and *fall in love* before he would lighten up. It was *painful*.”

“You’re not invited to the wedding.” Sapnap declares.

“Oh, so there is a wedding?” Karl perks up, “I was thinking spring.”

“Guys,” Quackity says, slightly strained, “Please. I just wanna get out of here. I’m not thinking more than a day into the future until I get to sleep for more than eight hours at once.”

“Agreed.” Sapnap says, fervently, looping one hand with Dream’s and the other with Quackity’s. Karl has his arm around Quackity’s other shoulder, holding him close without boxing him in. George holds on to Dream so tight nothing could break them apart.

“I never,” Dream says, voice cracking like leaves underfoot, sunlight delightfully coloring his voice, “wanna step into this fucking room again.”

“You got yourself a deal.” George says, and together, a wincing tangle of arms and limbs, they stumble out of the throne room.

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

Seeing as I did all of the sappy stuff in the last chapter we can get straight into appriciating each and every single one of you for reading and commenting and just, being the best damn readers we could have asked for. love yall.

And as a special treat, you get this epilogue today! Whoooo!

And!!! And!!! We are writing a lil post-sunlight coda with Communication and hurt/comfort!!! So do not fear, their story isn't over quite yet! :D If you subscribe to either me or personalised-radio, then you can be notified when we post it - and when we post anything else! If you liked our writing here, i'm sure there will be something in our past/future catalogue that you'll like too!

and now, a message from lovely hannah!

Hello hello!!!! It looks like this is the final part of the fic :) thank you so much to all of the people that came along with us as we posted, leaving comments or just checking in to read. We loved every single comment u sent and read each one at least six times lol

I want to say thank u to jess and tay and to mari's friend, all of whom beta'ed this fic for us and helped make it as nice as it turned out. Thank u guys!!!!

I also want to thank mari! U have been a very dear friend, one of my biggest cheerleaders since I STARTED writing longer fics, and a source of friendship i wouldnt trade for anything!!! When I asked if u wanted to collab, u didnt even hesitate even tho 5/5 wasnt even in ur interest and u never said no to any romantic subplots I wanted to add (not even the secret marriage one) or to any ambience on the playlist (I cannot believe u let me put hannah montana on there). Working with u has pushed a lot of my writing boundaries out in ways I didnt think I'd ever be comfortable doing and it has been so much fun every second, even when I was obsessively editing and rewriting and digging my heels in. Thank u most of all for being my friend!!!!!!

Within the green swathes of trees, a small blue wagon kicks up dust in its wake. The horse; Patches, small and brown, happily continues forward under the bright sunlight, dappling through the leaves and letting the dust dance in the air. There is no need for speed, no need to stick to rough undergrowth.

No, for all that the wagon bounces along the path, it does so gently, following a well-established road. At the back of the wagon, under its curved roof, Dream sits, legs hanging over the edge. He leans back, pressing against the pillows piled behind him, a buffer between him and the sacks of supplies within. In the last few days of their travels, it's become Dream's favorite spot. It stays in the sun for most of the day, and despite how the first day of travel gave him bright pink skin and a peeling nose, there he remains.

It's a soft heat, a gentle heat; nothing like the endless scorching of the Nether. It warms his skin,

reminds him that he's alive. He's alive, breathing in forest air that smells of petrichor and tastes of spring. Somewhere in the distance, the bees hum, the wind whistles in the trees and the wheels trundle along the stones.

He hears his friends laughing and finds the strength to stand up, resting his arms on the roof of the wagon and looking over to see what they're up to. Quackity is sitting at the front of the wagon but Sapnap is the one actually leading Patches, her reins in his hand as she follows him down the path. Karl and George walk just to the side; George is the one giggling loud enough for it to carry back to Dream and Dream takes a second to watch him, notice the way that the sunlight loves him nearly as much as Dream does for how nicely it shines on him.

"Councilman Soot humbly requests," Karl reads out formally, brandishing the paper in front of him, as if they haven't read it repeatedly between the lot of them in various voices, "That his former Royal Highness, Prince George return to the capital to officially recognize the newly established Council of Leadership."

"Fat chance." George wipes at his eyes, "No way! Why would he even bother asking Bad to *send* this!? We left a *note* and it *explicitly* said we weren't coming back."

It was a nice note, too. Dream had watched Sapnap scribble it out and leave it on Bad's desk before they'd snuck out at dawn, before anyone else had woken up. Karl's friends had had the wagon and Patches ready and waiting and they'd been out of the city before the sun had even fully risen.

"Maybe he thought having something to actually show for all their work would trick you back." Sapnap scoffs from the front of their party, "He's not gonna give up until he's got us all back in that damn castle."

"We aren't going." George reiterates, "Ever again. If they need us, we made sure one of them knows where to find us."

"*Some* of them know." Dream chimes in, smiling when George immediately turns around to grin at him, walking backward.

"You didn't actually tell Tommy where we were going, right?"

"We *said* we could let important people know." Dream shrugs. "I owe him a duel."

"None of us owe anyone anything." Karl corrects, "We all wiped the slate clean. Don't get it twisted, Dream. He *requested* a duel and you graciously accepted, deferred to a later date."

"Okay, Mr. Lawyer," Dream rolls his eyes, "I *deferred*, but yes, Tommy has the address."

"If Wilbur drops by, you're dealing with him, then." Quackity stretches out, tilting his face up toward the sun. His wings are out. It was only last week, when they crossed into the Badlands through an official checkpoint, that he'd felt comfortable letting them free again.

"Why?" Dream teases, "He'd probably be coming by to see *you*."

"Don't fuckin' start, dude, Prime," Quackity waves him away while the others all cackle together.

"I can't believe you didn't tell us you two had a *thing*."

"It was not a *thing*," Quackity stresses loudly, "It was a *play*. I was *playing* him and he took it way too seriously."

"I cannot believe he went on a whole rant about your insidious, seductive charms but he was actually just mad you got yourself two hot new bed buds and he was jealous about it."

"Don't call us bed buds." Sapnap gives Karl a look, "For fuck's sake, of all the things to call us."

"You don't wanna be bed buds with me, handsome?" Karl simpers and then nearly eats shit when George trips him when he isn't looking.

Quackity points and laughs, loud and obnoxious.

Dream remembers traveling with Karl and Quackity as XD. He cared about them, in a detached sort of way. He cared about them because he could see that Sapnap did, and, like George, XD loved Sapnap. As himself, sans magic thrumming through his blood, the last few weeks have been spent learning to care for them as himself. It's easy, in the end. They're both funny and sarcastic, biting in some places and kind in others. Karl makes a great stew when given the right ingredients and he'd given Dream access to pull any book from his entire library that Dream would want before they'd left (with plans for Karl to eventually send for his guild to pack up the whole building and send him his things when they settle more permanently). Quackity is much more mischievous without the guilt and fear of Schlatt hanging over his head, and likes to prod Dream into long-running jokes that annoy the others.

Most importantly, when Sapnap looks at either of them, his face softens like Dream has never seen before.

Dream is still relearning his friends. He hasn't *forgotten* anything, but things have changed on both sides. While it's only been months for them, it's been...a long time, for Dream. Time passes differently in the Nether. It's both not as slow and not as meaningful. He doesn't *feel* much older, but his soul has aged with what he experienced there. When he tries to think about it, it seems like a blur of just - pain. He remembers waiting, clearer than anything else. The endless pacing, the sleep that he snatched in the corners of fortresses and high in trees of azure leaves. Wondering whether they would ever really come for him. Whether they even should.

There are scars littering his body that Sapnap does not remember. It had been a ritual of theirs from when they were little; lying in their dorms, pointing to each and every one, making up even more insane stories to how they got them. Sometimes, the scar across Dream's nose had been from a dragon, a lion, an elder guardian. Sometimes, the nick at Sapnap's chin was a great leap to escape from his father, an arrow he barely deflected, a fight gone wrong. Dream and his brother look at each other and there are scars they do not know. Here, on Dream's arm, a patch of withered skin that he covers in bandages. He hasn't had the courage to tell them about the charcoal black skeletons that rattled, their undead bodies striding with purpose. How a single touch from their sword left his arm weak for days and days, an injury that he doesn't know if he'll ever recover from fully.

Dream knows that he flinches away from Sapnap now, and that alone is enough to break his heart. He's always loved the way his friend was warm whenever he draped his long arms over his shoulders, a hearth and a home all in the person he knows better than anyone else. It's been getting better, but incrementally, a snail's pace. Sapnap placed his hand on Dream's shoulder the other day and Dream was viciously, viscerally reminded of a blaze landing a shot on his back, a burn that he couldn't put out until it ran out of things to turn to ash. For days after, he remembers hiding high above in the ceiling of this great fiery cavern, back pressed to the cool quartz he had been able to hollow out, the only relief he could get without water, which was too precious to waste on a burn. He always has water with him now.

He remembers, too, the way that divinity buzzed under his skin. A thousand tiny chains, wrapped

around him, overwhelming with immense power that was all his and not his at the same time. He remembers killing the Warden; striking deep into wounds that he and George had left before he was dragged away. The rush of giddiness as he felt the throne tremble and the gateway open. He had thought that, even after all this time, George had come for him. Imagine his surprise when of all people, kicking and screaming and swearing up a storm, Tommy was there.

In the end, it didn't matter how. All that mattered had been escaping - escaping, and finding George. No matter what. That had been his thought at the instant he plunged Tommy's fallen sword into the heart of the Warden. And then, he was everything and nothing all at once. Swept away in a tide of divinity, hollowing him out, making something more, something new.

And Dream. Well. Dream is something new now, too. Not exactly the same boy that prowled the Nether in search of a way out, and not exactly the demigod that escaped it either. He's just Dream.

There have been days where it is clearer; where he wakes up from nightmares of crimson fire and the bed is too soft, the heat of his friends' arms is suffocating rather than comforting. There are days when a shriek of a child in a town they pass through will leave him gasping, mind thrown into the past. There are those days, but he does not face them alone. When he feels the paranoia crawling up his spine, he takes a pencil and sketches out plans for their new home, writes lists of crop rotations and reminds himself that he lives in the sun.

He has a feeling that one day, he'll remember nothing about it at all except the bare bones of the story. He was caught. He stayed and waited until his worry and his fear and his loyalty allowed it no longer. There was a light and a loud boy being dragged in to join him by the Warden. He took up the boy's sword and killed the Warden - *became* the Warden. He escaped. He found George and Sapnap. He traveled with them. He returned to the throne and George rescued him. His friends rescued him.

He'd be okay with that - with forgetting. The Nether had not been kind to him

And the six months he was gone in the overworld weren't kind to George or Sapnap, either. George is clingier than he used to be, sharper when he thinks Dream is in danger or has put himself at risk. He sometimes needs help figuring out if something was real or not, if his regained memories actually happened or if he's made them up. Sometimes he *has*; some combination of memories of him and Dream and him and XD. Sapnap is paranoid, less playful, less immature. He laughs the same but something weighs him when he smiles, something heavy. He doesn't call for Dream anymore, or ask for help. He doesn't sleep much, even when it isn't his watch shift, and he checks in on Dream near constantly, more than he checks on George, even. Sometimes Dream feels him just *watching*. He understands and lets it go, but it can't last forever. For now, though, it's okay.

When they get their new home set up, when there is nothing else to do but work and think, no pressure on their heads, they'll have to talk about it, all three of them. He was rescued, but there is still the poison root deep inside him, that hot anger of abandonment that he cannot quite forget. He knows it's not their fault, knows that they couldn't have known, but well. That's why they should talk. But their future is more than just hard conversations and sleepless nights; it's laughter and living and a frankly indecent lack of boundaries between the three of them - five, now. Both have grown away from Dream, but they're still all three connected at their base and using the kind sun to find each other again.

He was gone. He was gone but now he's here, standing on the back of a wagon, listening to Karl do increasingly bad renditions of Wilbur Soot's accent as he monologues confessions of adour to Quackity while George, Sapnap, and Quackity all judge each one.

“Too casual,” Sapnap heckles, “Where’s the, like, angst, man? Everything that dude says is filled with *angst*.”

“No, no, it isn’t angst, it’s *drama*.” George corrects. “He speaks with *pomp*, Karl. You’ll never get it right if you don’t speak with pomp!”

“What the fuck - what the fuck is *pomp*?” Quackity chokes through laughter, “*Stop*, all of you fuckin’ stop, I can’t handle this. Dream! Dream, you dick, you started this!”

“No, I didn’t.” Dream hops off the back of the wagon and jogs to climb up next to Quackity, who helps him without being asked, a hand under his elbow to help him up. “I just *said* he’d probably be coming to see you.”

“That’s *starting* it, Dream!” Quackity complains, settling back down with the perfect amount of space between them so that his wings don’t crowd Dream and Dream has space to not accidentally touch them more than necessary. Quackity doesn’t like casual touches to his wings but he’s okay with the occasional brush of feathers against an arm or shoulder, such as now with the two of them sharing the bench.

“I think Karl started it, personally.” Dream shrugs. “He’s the one doing voices.”

“I play to audience desires.” Karl bows low as he walks, once again stumbling when George takes yet another chance to trip him.

“Play to shutting the fuck up.” Quackity looks amused, though, and his happy tone gives him away.

“How can I be quiet when my muse looks at me?” Karl demands, frowning artfully, “How can I silence my tongue when that which inspires every thought, every word, every beat of my heart gazes upon me?”

“Sapnap!” Quackity complains, “Sap, he’s doing it again!”

“I can’t stop him from orating, Big Q.” Sapnap says over his shoulder, but Dream can hear the laughter.

“Dream,” George says and his voice cuts through the playful bickering, brings Dream’s eyes to George without question. He’d say that it was the Nether, his time as XD, that makes him so *aware* but he knows that that isn’t true. He’s been painfully aware of this man since he was eight years old, gazing at a beautiful boy in a garden. That isn’t anything supernatural, it’s just a part of what makes him Dream.

“Switch with Karl.” George asks but it doesn’t come out as a question. He holds out a hand. “Walk with me.”

Dream hops down without hesitation, laughing at Quackity’s loud complaints as Karl does take his place, crowding up to Quackity to pepper his face in dramatic, loud kisses and compliments. Quackity breaks into giggles as he shoves at Karl but mostly lets him get away with it. Dream has a feeling that Sapnap will join them soon, if only so he can also make awful, cringy comments that make their friends laugh, too.

He takes George’s hand and lets their arms swing between them as they walk, their laughing friends and a wagon full of their new life right beside him. Nightmare, fresh enchantments still settling in, is at his side but he’s had to draw it only once since they left Kinoko, to show the guards at the checkpoint. He doubts that he’ll never have to wield the blade again but, for now, it

sits sleeping in his belt. Its twin blade, Schlong, is at Sapnap's side, too. He thinks it's about time he talked Sapnap into renaming it but it makes Karl giggle every time someone says the name so he doesn't think he'll be very successful.

"You okay?" George drops his voice, looking up at him curiously. His eyes are warm, hair curly and messy from the heat, face finally bruise-free. It's taken a long time, but most of the non-permanent marks from that painful week of captivation are finally faded enough to not be noticeable. Quackity's neck still rings a faint yellow, even nearly a month later, but Dream thinks that, too, will fade into his natural tan as they continue to walk in the warm sun of the Badlands.

"Me?" Dream shrugs, "Mhm. I was just -"

"Basking." George nods seriously, "I know. I see you acting like a lizard back there."

"I'm not! I'm just enjoying it!"

"That's what basking is."

"Is it?"

George laughs, a melody that harmonizes with Dream's heartbeat, nodding, "Yes, idiot."

"Oh, well...then, yeah. Just basking. It feels good."

"Okay." George agrees simply and turns back to the road. "Bask away, then."

Dream flexes his fingers and George immediately flexes back. Dream tries not to look but, as always, he's dragged into it by pure instinct. George is stronger, keeps his eyes ahead of him. George has always been stronger than him in lots of ways. It's one of Dream's favorite things about him, that core of steel that gives him the will to hold back.

Still, not even George can resist the pull for long and he catches Dream's eyes, cheeks going just a hint of red.

"What?"

"Nothing." Dream shrugs. "Just looking."

"Well, don't." George nudges against his arm, nearly knocking Dream over if not for the firm hold he has on Dream's hand.

"I can't help it."

"You can. They're your eyes, just close them or something. Keep them to yourself."

"You don't like my eyes?"

"I don't like them *staring* at me."

"I wasn't staring."

"Good. Keep it that way, then." George isn't smiling, but his voice gives him away. Dream wants to bask in *this*. Even his favorite spot and the warmth of the sun, he'd give it all up if he got to stay with George. Hold hands and argue and smile the whole time that they do.

"George." he says quietly and knows he has George's attention even before he does. "Dance with

me.”

“*Dance?*” George snorts, “We’re walking. There’s no music.”

“We never needed music.” Dream bounces in front of him, shifting their hands into the proper hold, “Dance with me.”

“You’re an idiot, Dream.” George says firmly as he settles a hand on Dream’s hip and Dream drops his free hand to his shoulder.

Dream loves dancing with George; Dream likes *movement*. He likes jumping through trees and on houses and up walls, likes the adrenaline that comes with making long leaps that no one believes he’ll make. But no jump compares to dancing with George. George had come to them directly after his first dancing lesson, young and gangly. He’d danced with them both and, while Sapnap had hated it and purposefully stiffened his joints to make George give up on using him as a practice partner, Dream had taken to it like a duck to water. As they’d grown, it had become a *thing*. George would sneak away to find him and they’d go to some useless room in the castle and dance for hours at a time. The only music they had was the faltering waltzes they’d memorized from balls or dinners and Dream would hum since George couldn’t hold a tune.

There had been a few times - only a few, but enough - when Dream had danced with himself in the Nether. When he’d closed his eyes and held his arms out and hummed as he circled a red room and pretended he was dancing with George again.

He doesn’t have to pretend anymore. He hums and George closes his eyes, rests his head on Dream’s shoulder as they step in time to Dream’s music down the path. The sunlight flashes, birds sing, their friends’ voices grow steadily more distant as they slow down until they’re simply rocking in place.

“You’re rusty.” Dream teases and George scoffs.

“You should have asked me more often, before.” George says, “You didn’t even twirl me, what the fuck, Dream?”

“I’m so sorry,” Dream apologizes with a laugh, “Should I twirl you now?”

“No, it’s too late.” George slides his hands from Dream’s hips to his back, leaning more fully into him as he hugs him. “You lost your chance.”

“I’ll have more.” Dream says daringly and knows it’s true. “Next time.”

“Don’t forget again.”

“I won’t.”

“*Lovebirds!*” Sapnap breaks through their little bubble, sounding far enough away that it’s a little bit surprising. “Will you two fuckin’ listen to me?”

“What?” George blinks rapidly, peering around Dream toward the wagon, where Sapnap indeed has joined the other two. Quackity is happily squished between them, Karl resting his head on Quackity’s shoulder while Sapnap holds Patches reins, looking at George and Dream. The wagon has managed to go far enough that they need to jog to catch up, still holding hands.

“Sorry, what?”

"I said, sunset is soon. We should find a place to camp."

"Good idea," Dream agrees, "See any spots?"

"If my map's right," Karl interjects, "There should be a nice little campground about..." Karl pulls his map out of one of his many pockets, "Yep, about a mile down the way. We can camp out! There's even a river, Sapnap!"

"What? Are you saying I stink?"

"No, I'm saying I want you to get shirtless and do that water thing you did in the jungle again."

"Water thing?"

Dream lets Karl drag Sapnap into a new conversation, pleased with the plan.

In a mile, they find the little campsite Karl mentioned. They set up camp, close enough to a river that Quackity and George go to fish while Karl sets a perimeter and Dream and Sapnap build the tent and set out the beds - they carry three, now, and Sapnap just shoves two together. Dream builds a fire and Sapnap patrols a little ways outside of camp to make sure nothing is nested and waiting for nightfall to come out to play. Quackity and George return within an hour with five fish and a crab, which Karl steals to return to the water before anyone can claim it for dinner. They roast the fish over the fire and Sapnap points out an early evening star for Karl to tell them about, some story or fact or myth that goes along with the star and one near it.

After the fish are eaten and the bones buried, Karl breaks out sweets from his cloak of tricks - a small bag of marshmallows and chocolate Dream is vaguely convinced is the same chocolate they bought in the mountain town what feels far too close to a year ago to still be safe to eat. Sapnap doesn't hesitate, though, and if Sapnap is going to eat old chocolate, then Dream is going to eat old chocolate, too, even if George wrinkles his nose up at the both of them. Karl roasts the marshmallows and Sapnap hands Quackity the first finished one with just enough forced casualness that Dream picks up on it. For whatever reason, Quackity gets shy and smiley, takes the marshmallow with pink cheeks while Karl drapes himself over the both of them.

He and George meet eyes and George merely shrugs. Dream shrugs back, fond and amused in equal measure. He never thought he'd see the day Sapnap cared about anything more than training but it's here now and he's glad that it's with two people who seem to be as genuinely soft for him as he is for them.

When the sunlight dies, Dream takes first watch, always wanting to see the sunset, never willing to sleep until it's fully gone and he can enjoy the crisp night, too. The Nether didn't have a night, just as it didn't have a sun. He likes both, the way the stars come out and dot the entire sky in a trillion little bright specks.

George stayed with him during his shifts for the first few weeks that they traveled, unwilling to leave Dream alone, but the need for sleep on George's end and the need for some time to process by himself on Dream's end eventually drove him to retire with the others. Now, Dream says goodnight and the four of them sleep while Dream watches over them and maybe cleans up a little. When his shift ends and the moon is high, he goes to wake Sapnap. Sapnap has to extricate himself from Karl and Quackity, who fall in together under Karl's cloak, and Dream slips into bed with George, who sleepily accepts him with seeking arms and a mostly-asleep kiss to his neck.

Dream sleeps and he has no nightmares.

When he wakes next, it's to the sounds of breakfast being made, gentle laughter, sunlight breaking through the tent.

Dream is alive. He's with George and Sapnap, and he has new friends in Karl and Quackity. They're traveling to a new place, a place where they can live simply, away from the stress and pain and danger of court life. Perhaps, one day, Dream will crave a shake-up. Perhaps, one day, Dream will finally give in to one of Wilbur's seeking letters and visit the castle, see what his other friends are building now that the throne and monarchy have been abolished. Perhaps, one day, he'll set out to sea, even, in an attempt to find Puffy and tell her all that has happened in the years since they last spoke. Perhaps.

For now, he just rolls out of bed, missing George's warmth, and finds it in bright smiles greeting him.

"Dream." George smiles, hair wild from sleep, "You're awake."

"No shit," Sapnap scoffs, "What perception you have, Georgie."

"Don't start so early in the morning," Quackity complains, "It's too soon."

"Start what?" George asks innocently, like he and Sapnap aren't *both* planning to somehow spill their breakfasts on each other.

"Give it up, Big Q," Dream sighs, joining him at the fire, "I've been trying to stop them for years. It's like some sort of platonic foreplay."

"Did someone say foreplay? What about fiveplay?" Karl wiggles his eyebrows but his eyes are half-open and he's still half-cat-napping on Quackity's shoulder.

Dream laughs so hard he cries, his wheezing interrupting his friends' playful fight and eventually roping them into laughing, too.

Light presses feathery kisses to their hair as the sun rises, and Dream grins, revived.

coda: eyes are shining bright

Chapter Summary

Three months of freedom; from the throne, from responsibility, from expectations.

Three months. And then the nightmares started.

Chapter Notes

YES WE ARE BACK HELLO this is hannah :) we just wanted to say thank u for all the support that this fic has received since we started posting. It was overwhelming and positive in every way and an amazingly kind welcome to writing fic for this fandom. We really enjoyed getting to continue working in this au and are excited to keep working on it in the future with some other stuff! Thank u again and please enjoy!!!

Thank you to jess for once again editing for us, we would be lost without u <3

In other news, we have something fun!! We're putting this fic into a series because we have a few more things that we'd really like to write for the au :) As a teaser, i can tell u a few! The next one coming will be SBI-focused, and another will be a direct sequel focusing on our scarecrow boys that has a lot more world building lol I do not have a timeline just yet but we're actively working on these :D

Also, we thought it might be nice to have a discord server related to this fic! If you'd like to join and meet some friends or talk about the fic or other stuff, feel free to join and take a look around! <https://discord.gg/HS6T3pbFTk> <- here is the link!

ALL ART LINKED AT THE BOTTOM BECAUSE THERE WAS SO MUCH WE RAN OUT OF CHARATERS IN THE FIRST NOTE LMAO THANK YOU ALL!!!

this was. supposed to be 20k MAX. how did we get here

Chapter cw: Self-neglect, paranoia, unhealthy coping mechanisms, discussions of past abuse, illness, flashbacks, panic attacks, unintentional self-harm, healing, working through trauma, communication

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Sapnap doesn't *know* when his flame truly started to smolder out but he's got a pretty good idea.

He thinks that it was probably the night they destroyed the throne. He'd felt something shift in him the week before, when Schlatt had come for them, but he thinks that the wick has been cut right around when he'd fainted in Karl's arms. He hadn't *realized*, not at the time, not until they were already on the road to the Badlands and he'd shivered as a cold breeze wafted through camp one night. By then, it was too late to turn back and - for all that Kinoko had taken from him, he'd loved

it and knew that the forming government needed his parents there if he and George and Dream weren't sticking around to help. Besides, it was more a flicker than a splutter - he still ran his normal temperature *most* of the time. Karl and Quackity hadn't noticed anything when they slept on him, and maybe it wasn't a *bad* thing. He wasn't losing control of his temperature anymore! Or, at least, he couldn't reach the sort of temperature that would hurt other people when he did.

And it had seemed fine. He'd gone well over three months with little impact - they'd made their trip and they'd crossed into the Badlands and the Badlands was naturally warmer, anyway, so it wasn't like he was cold or anything. He just...snuggled deeper into Karl's cloak when they slept, if he needed to, maybe forced himself under Dream's arm when he sunbathed at the back of the wagon more often. Nothing intense. Nothing awful.

They'd made it to his holiday home, too, and he'd given them a grand tour of both it and the little village only a few minutes north. The home was more a mansion than a house, and it had sat empty for a long time - only caretakers from the village being paid by his family had been inside since they'd moved to Kinoko. But it had been clean and set up for them when they'd arrived, bedrooms set aside for all five of them and a fully stocked kitchen and a kindly bear hybrid to run the place until she could teach them what they needed to know. Most of the rooms had been opened, though the furniture retained its dust covers until they chose to remove them.

Everything was *good*. Sapnap prided himself on his identity as a demon, a *fire* demon, but only having to pay the price of some warmth? And, in return, getting to live in a big house with his beloveds and his best friends, getting to walk to the village for food every week with Karl, holding hands, or helping Quackity in the herb garden he'd claimed, or he and Dream and George tearing down outdated decorations and replacing them with things that they brought with them in the wagon? His inner flame in exchange for a kind of warmth that no fire would ever give to him like a *home*, a real one, would? A home that wasn't threatened by the throne? It was an easy trade.

He hadn't hesitated to pay that price and, for a time, he'd thought it was a good one.

Then, the nightmares started.

He's hiding in a familiar closet, warm blood running over his fingers, panicked breathing against his palm as he tries to keep the assistant - Quackity, he knows it's Quackity - quiet, tries to keep him safe. Quackity sobs into his hand, blood gushing; he's being too loud, he's going to get them caught -

He hears Schlatt's voice in the hallway; "Sweetheart? Honeybunch? Come on, I know you're there. Do you really think your dog of a knight can keep you safe? Do you really think he can do anything at all?"

Under his palm, Quackity whimpers, chokes, a wheezing sob echoing up from his bruised throat and escaping through Sapnap's fingers. It's too loud. It's too loud, and he hisses as much: "You'll get us killed!"

The sobs aren't muffled anymore, Quackity's eyes widening as Sapnap snaps at him. Nothing can stop the words that spill from Quackity, words that might as well be daggers for all that they plunged into his heart.

"Please, sir, please, please don't hurt me again, please, please I'll be good, I'll be good, I promise, I'll do anything, please -"

"Q-"

"There you are!" Schlatt's voice seems to grow louder, the roar of a nightmare thing as the doors swing open with a crash of thunder. Sapnap moves out of instinct, but in the same moment he pulls his sword to point at Schlatt, Quackity's begging abruptly falls silent.

"Q?"

Quackity stares back at him with blood pouring endlessly down his cheek, a blank look in his uncovered eye. His face is pale, devoid of panic, devoid of that desperate need to live that had called on Sapnap to save him the night of the coup - of anything at all.

The hand covering Quackity's mouth feels like it has been dunked in a bucket of ice. The pins and needles freeze a trail up his arm, shooting chills into his veins and sending the shards straight towards his heart.

"Quackity," he says, his heart shattering, his candle flickering out as he watches the last traces of affection and fear fall from his lover's eyes like tears.

"My birdy," Schlatt says, oil slick and smug, "*Mine.*"

There was so much blood; too much. Quackity's face was entirely red, now, painted in his own blood. But a smile pulls at his mouth, dripping dark crimson through several splits in his lips. His wings catch fire, burning up, the stench of charred feathers as they seem to burst away like embers popping from an open flame.

"Yours," He echoes, and it is to Quackity's screaming; agonizing shrieks muffled by his clenched teeth, yet his expression never changes from the blank smile. Quackity reaches up, finds Sapnap's hand and brings it to his throat. Horrified, Sapnap allows it.

"All mine." Schlatt's voice whispers but it's Sapnap's lips that form the words as Sapnap's fingers close around the delicate, bruised skin of Quackity's neck and squeeze - squeeze - squeeze until his eyes go bloodshot and his mouth gapes and -

Sapnap bolts awake, shivering beneath thin sheets.

In the darkness of their room, with only the moonlight brushing past the curtains, he can't see either Karl or Quackity. He can hear them both, though; Quackity's quiet snoring, Karl's deep, slow breathing.

As has become his new normal, Sapnap doesn't attempt to go back to sleep. A larger bed has allowed for more space between the three of them when they sleep and it no longer requires a full shuffle of three bodies for him to escape their sleeping arrangements; instead, he carefully climbs over Karl and watches Karl swiftly turn into where he had been laying just before. It brings Karl within touching range of Quackity and, sensing a new source of warmth, Quackity quickly latches on to Karl. They both continue to sleep peacefully. Sapnap watches them when his eyes adjust to the moonlight; the pale skin of Quackity's unmarked neck catches his attention. He remembers how it felt under his fingers. He tastes bile in the back of his throat and turns away from them both.

Dream and George are on the other end of the hall. The first few nights this had happened, Sapnap had just crawled into their bed. Dream had just sleepily lifted an arm and Sapnap had wriggled between the two of them and fallen into an uneasy sleep that had, while not being restful, at least been nightmare-free. That had stopped working around the fourth night and Sapnap didn't want to keep ruining their sleep, too, so he's created a new routine in the last few weeks.

He goes to the kitchen and makes himself a cup of tea. He drinks the tea and watches the moon for

about half an hour, and then he packs on a few cloaks, usually with Karl's on top of two or three others, and goes outside to chop wood until he's so tired he can barely see - barely think, and much more importantly, barely think. This time last year, Sapnap could have chopped for hours and been fine after a meal. Now, he barely gets through forty-five minutes before he's panting for breath, shivering in the cool night air even through his cloaks. Every night, he finds himself chopping a little bit less than the night before.

Still, the chopping does it's job. He goes back inside, bathes the sweat and stink of labor and fear off his skin, and returns to their shared bedroom. When he crawls back into the soft bed, muscles sore and tense from the cold, Karl nearly always blinks awake just long enough to pull Sapnap in between him and Quackity again before falling asleep. Sapnap just soaks in the uninterrupted warmth they both offer until the sun finally rises and they begin to wake. And if he pretends to blink the sleep out of his eyes, smile like they've just woken him up with their soft kisses and gentle bickering, then it's a part he's happy to play.

He's exhausted; he spends his days doing chores and sleeping in micro-naps that don't allow his brain long enough to dream while the others are busy. It keeps his body going but he's always drained now, reflexes slow when he and Dream train, thoughts even slower when Karl asks him a question. The nightmares are barely a problem anymore; not when he isn't sleeping long enough for them to even haunt him. He lies when they ask about his nightly excursions, says that he uses the time to chop needed wood and meditate - sometimes it doesn't feel like a lie, if one counts chopping wood until they're a zombie as meditation.

Sapnap knows something is wrong. He knows that his flame is ebbing and that he's fading but he can't make himself talk to anyone about it. The thought of telling any of them, even Dream, that the source of his heat, of his strength is *gone* - he can't. It fills him with more fear than the nightmares do. He thinks about it and he hates himself for the thoughts, because they always, *always* roll around to Schlatt, to Karl or Quackity maybe changing their mind when they realize -

He can't. He can't let anyone know how vulnerable he is right now. They might take advantage, might *hurt him* or, worse, *leave him* -

It's these thoughts that keep him lying awake long after the nightmares, a pit of anxiety gnawing itself deep into his gut like a rat in a box. It steals his breath and shocks him when he least expects it. Karl drapes a hand over his shoulder and all he can think about is the cage, iron bars digging into his back. Quackity wakes up from a nightmare and looks at him with blank, blank eyes and Sapnap feels like he's draped in Schlatt's skin with the way Quackity regards him. It doesn't matter that Karl always gives him room to breathe; it doesn't matter that Quackity's eyes clear and he smiles like the sun, the thoughts fight their way through regardless.

The only time they don't is when he trains with Dream. It's easy to slip back into their normal routine; only instead of lessons in the morning, they each wake up soft and slow with their significant others before tripping downstairs in various states of dazed bleariness. For Sapnap, it's the kind of exhaustion that comes from lack of sleep rather than an overabundance of it, but he can't complain.

Still, he downs coffee - increasingly black as the days go by - and forces his eyes to adjust to the harsh daylight so he can pick up his sword. They've both hung up their netherite swords, though Sapnap knows Dream still keeps Nightmare sharp and polished, as he does with Schlong despite no longer using them to practice. Instead, there are a pile of scuffed iron swords at the edge of the small field they use to fight in, the blades dull.

They used to fight for hours, Sapnap remembers, as Dream's sword passes over his head. At the

start, Dream would get tired before him, the Nether and the lost divinity catching up on him. But if Dream has thrived from the familiar motions, grown stronger in the sunlight and cool air, Sapnap is only faltering more and more with each passing day.

He switches hands to parry another of Dream's swings and his arms ache, bone scraping against bone as he tries to adjust his stance to compensate for the loss of strength. He feels himself about to slip and lets it go. Dream is surprised by the motion, stumbling forward as the force he expected to meet him failed to materialize. The iron sword drops to the dirt. Sapnap barrels forwards, shoving his shoulder into Dream's midriff with only the slightest twinge of pain. Despite the potions, his shoulder hadn't quite set right from the injury he got from the throne room. All it takes is that sharp shock of pain; nothing debilitating, but a shock nonetheless, coupled with the fact that it's *Dream* that he's fighting, and Sapnap is unbalanced. He pulls away from the tackle with a hastiness that leaves him unsteady, leaves him wrongfooted.

It doesn't send him into the past like flashbacks do to Quackity, but it twists his vision, turns bright sunlight to the gold-draped halls of the castle, turns Dream into XD, into an enemy.

And when Dream reaches out a hand, concern written plainly across his face, Sapnap flinches.

It's a reversal of their roles, and they both know it. Immediately, Sapnap feels sick, bile burning his throat and guilt pricking shamefully up the back of his neck. Dream had needed weeks before he stopped flinching from Sapnap's warmth (not that there is much warmth left these days), and here Sapnap is, ruining all that progress because he can't get the feeling of the cold edge of XD's magic blade from his mind.

"Sapnap...?" Dream asks, hesitant.

"I'm fine," Sapnap grits out, "I'm *fine*, Dream, just, just give me a moment."

"Dude," Dream says reproachfully, "No offense, but you don't look fine."

"I said give me a minute!" Sapnap snaps, and instantly regrets the sharp tone of his voice as Dream's face shuts down.

"Okay," he says, hands up, placating, like Sapnap is an animal in need of calming and the regret is swallowed up as Sapnap's hackles rise, "Alright, I'll be just over here, okay?"

It's not okay. It's not fucking okay because he's still here, he's still *watching*, just like he did as XD, always watching and never saying a single fucking word, not even using his voice, all to deceive and lie and run away from the consequences of his actions -

Sapnap becomes aware that his fingers have wormed their way in his hair. He can feel the strands tightening, twisting around his fingers hard enough to cut off blood flow. There's a sword on the ground in front of him (*weapon, enemy, a fight, danger, George* -). He realizes that he can't see XD.

He whips his head up, straining frantically in order to try and see him. For a split second, he is terrified, utterly convinced that XD will have melted back into the forest, pulled back into danger while Sapnap was having his stupid freakout. That XD is about to emerge from the trees, and finish the job he started in the throne room.

But - it's Dream. It's only Dream.

Dream is there, on the edge of the green. Conflict wars in his eyes; the desire to go to Sapnap and comfort him and the respect he has for Sapnap's wishes. In the end, the desire wins out. He still

approaches Sapnap cautiously, which stings more than it should, but Sapnap appreciates how he stops just shy of touching him.

"Sap?"

"I'm sorry," Sapnap says, and the words come out more hoarse than he expects them to, "Sorry, I didn't mean to snap at you."

"Anything in particular set it off?" Dream asks carefully.

"Just," Sapnap starts, then finds himself at a loss as to explain what just happened in a way that doesn't make his chest constrict and his heart panic, "Got caught up in my head. You really got me on the last move, man."

He throws out a half-hearted smile which he knows won't convince Dream in the slightest, but hopefully he'll get the message.

"Just something I picked up," Dream says, "Want me to teach it to you?"

Sapnap shakes his head, "I think I'm done for the day. Maybe tomorrow?"

"Sure." Dream says, and holds out a hand. This time, Sapnap takes it, and allows Dream to haul him to his feet.

Side by side with Dream, covered in a sheen of sweat, he can almost imagine everything is completely fine.

George knows something is up with Sapnap. People don't live out of each other's pockets day in and day out for months without knowing exactly how the other moves when they're angry, happy, hungry. Even before that, though, they were brothers. *Closer* than any brothers George might have otherwise had, even - without any of the pesky inheritance nonsense that so often destroys royal families.

So, George knows something is wrong. And he knows that the others see it too. The tension seeps into the very frame of the house like fresh blood from a wound, slinking around corners as a poisonous fog, clinging to their skin in the early morning, stinging where there should be softness. It fades into the shadows just enough for them to ignore it; most of the time, at least. Most of the time, George can rib Sapnap gently and have him grin back; they can both team up on Dream to argue about everything and nothing. George can watch as Sapnap and Karl and Quackity dance straight through the honeymoon period with blushing cheeks and shy smiles. But he can also see how Sapnap falters more and more each day, how he pulls away with each bleary morning and silent night.

He knows Sapnap isn't sleeping. He's not sure if the others see it, too, though; for all that Dream and Sapnap were each other's other halves for almost their entire lives, he hadn't been there during those long, terrified months of running. And for all that Karl and Quackity love Sapnap, they don't know the same bone-deep intricacies that come from a lifetime spent together.

George knows the way sleep weighs on Sapnap. And right now, Sapnap is carrying a greater weight than George has ever seen. It is poisoning their new home, the happy ending they worked so hard to build, and sometimes the question of *why* is utterly suffocating.

So he leaves. He wanders with a freedom that he's never had, barely had a taste of from his moonlit walks with XD. He wanders past the barriers of their home, past their vegetable garden

and Quackity's little square of pond and herbs, and the half-finished chicken coop Dream swore to have done before winter. He wanders into the woods that no longer hold any fear of mercenaries or thrones or crowns.

The one thing that remains the same, however, is worrying about Sapnap. Far more insidious than a throne; he can run from a throne, and drag Sapnap along with him. He doesn't have the faintest clue how to pull Sapnap from his own mind.

George walks, and he wonders and he prays for a god that is no longer here. He has Dream, of course, and he'd never, ever give him up for anything. But sometimes...sometimes he does miss XD. If only for the ability to pop into existence the instant George began to ache for something he couldn't remember. He knows he could go home, he *knows*. But he'll never see XD again, and for a time, he had loved him. He still does.

George walks and mourns and worries. He loses all track of time, space, direction; only looking up periodically to see the distant lights of the house, flickering away like a beacon, calling him home. He doesn't go back, not yet. As much as there are still problems weighing on his mind, he can walk the woods, in the dark, without fear. That alone is worth a few more minutes of freedom.

The peace of the wood is disturbed, however, by the sound of branches breaking, undergrowth being disturbed by rapid footsteps; a weapon pulled clean through leaves.

Something coils in his chest, a fear he thought forgotten, and he reaches for a weapon that isn't there as the sound gets louder and louder. His gut clenches, a stray thought flashing through his mind; *XD, help me* - before the trees part and he sees -

“Sapnap?” He says, fear dissipating in an instant, only to be replaced with concern.

It's not far from the house; certainly not far enough for *Sapnap* to be out of breath. It's not cold enough for *Sapnap* to be shaking, his sword in his hand visibly trembling. But beyond all of that, beyond any of these damning signs, the thing that scares George the most is how distant Sapnap looks. Like he is here, and not, all at the same time.

“George,” Sapnap says, ragged, “You’re okay.”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m fine,” George waves away the concern, stepping closer and resolutely ignoring how Sapnap doesn’t lower his sword, “I’m fine, I was just...out for a walk. Are you okay, dude?”

Sapnap blinks. “It’s dangerous, George.”

“There’s no one for miles, Sap, and monsters won’t spawn in this forest. No one is hunting us, the village is full of people your parents know and trust.” George keeps his voice level, wary of the hazy film over otherwise familiar eyes, “I’m safe, you’re safe. Karl and Quackity, they’re safe too. Dream is safe.”

Sapnap blinks again, and some of the fog lifts. His sword slowly lowers towards the ground. George is both surprised and not to see that it’s Schlong.

“You’re safe,” George says again, and a scowl quickly forms on Sapnap’s face.

“I know that. I can handle myself, George.”

“Never said you couldn’t,” George replies, still even and slow in his tone, but that only seems to make Sapnap’s frown deeper.

“Don’t -” He starts, and then his jaw snaps shut, his eyes darting to the ground and back up again, “Just come back to the house. You nearly gave me a damn heart attack, man. It isn’t safe out here at night.”

“You’re not my bodyguard anymore, Sapnap,” George says, and it’s supposed to be joking, but there’s a seriousness to his tone that he can’t remove.

“I know,” Sapnap replies. For a moment, they stand there, looking at each other in the half-darkness, wondering which one of them is going to break first.

Eventually, George sighs, and starts off in the direction of the house. Sapnap doesn’t put his sword away until they’ve passed over the threshold.

It isn’t that Quackity is disturbing his sleep. Sapnap hasn’t *been* sleeping, there’s no sleep for Quackity to disturb. It isn’t about the sleep, or lack thereof. It’s about what happens after.

For how attentive he is, Karl is a deep sleeper. A librarian’s luxury; to sleep at night and have no fear of danger. Even his history of shenanigans never inclined him to be a light sleeper, and a few months on the road with Sapnap and George wasn’t going to change that.

Karl sleeps like the fucking dead, and so it’s Sapnap that sits up when Quackity kicks him, breath hitching in that half-sob, half-sigh of a nightmare. It’s almost routine, as routine as his own nightmares, to cup one hand to Quackity’s cheek and rub weeks’ worth of sleepless nights out of his own eyes with the other.

“Angel?” His voice is scratchy, rough, lack of sleep lying heavy on his tongue. “Q? It’s okay.”

Quackity’s hands twist into the sheets as Sapnap leans over him, trying to rouse him from the ghosts of his past. Sapnap’s so tired. He can feel irritation welling up under his skin like a rotting bruise.

It’s not his fault. He tells himself, firmly.

“Q?” He says again, gently brushing over Quackity’s cheek with his thumb. The gentle motion startles Quackity, and he flinches under Sapnap’s touch, eyes blinking over with a haze of the past settled firmly over them.

“S-sir...?” Quackity breathes out, and Sapnap resists the urge to vomit.

“No, Q, it’s me. Just me.”

He hates this. He hates that Schlatt still has such a hold on Quackity, even after all this time. He hates that he haunts their bedroom, *their home*, as if he has a claim to their happy ending. He hates that when Quackity looks at him, sometimes, he only sees Schlatt.

He hates that sometimes...sometimes he hates Quackity for it, too.

Quackity blinks, and the haze does not clear. Sapnap nudges Karl sharply with a foot, but Quackity draws his attention again before he can check whether Karl has truly woken up.

“P-please,” Quackity whimpers, tiny and vulnerable, and Sapnap’s tired and flickering flame feels just a little bit smaller.

“Wazzit...?” There’s a grumble from his side, but he can’t turn to Karl just yet.

"You're okay," Sapnap says, focused in on Quackity even as his eyes burn with his lingering exhaustion, as his mind wades through the muddling mix to try and land on something suitably comforting, "You're okay, sweetheart-

For someone so recently asleep, Quackity moves fast. Fear flashes across his face, ear to ear with terror, and he pushes Sapnap away like a stranger; like a threat. Sapnap tumbles off the bed to Karl's yelp of surprise and Quackity babbling apologies.

Sapnap doesn't understand, mind sluggish and shocked and hurt, until a memory forces its way to the forefront of his mind - a slimy grin, words dripping in condescension and green-black marks on Quackity's throat. Fuck. Fuck.

Karl, for all that he woke up barely moments ago, already has his arms around Quackity, rubbing his back in motions that set a hot jolt of jealousy down Sapnap's spine, for all that he tells himself that he shouldn't be jealous of Quackity's fucking PTSD.

"I'm sorry," Quackity stammers, "Gods, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm *sorry* -"

"You're okay," Karl murmurs, shooting Sapnap a look that might have been confused, but in the harsh moonlight, simply seems admonishing. "You're alright, baby, it was just a nightmare."

"It was him," Quackity whispers, "It was him, I saw him--"

"Just a dream. Just a dream," Karl comforts, "He's not here. We are. Look at us, baby. We're both here."

"Karl?" Quackity asks, voice breaking, and Sapnap can't stand it.

He leaves them to each other in the warmth of a bedroom he no longer feels welcome in, and chops logs until he can no longer feel his fingers.

Sapnap doesn't really...think about it. He just...he walks into their sitting room and Karl's bag is on the ground, tucked out of the way, under his favorite overstuffed chair. He sits down in the chair and pulls the bag into his lap with no thoughts, only instinct.

There's not much inside. A handful of pens and pencils, a few scrapes of doodled-on paper, a small bag of gold and copper coins, a few books, including Karl's favorite fairy tale collection, and a hand-made journal latched with a small knot of leather that falls apart easily under Sapnap's hands. There's a small vial in an inner pocket, bright pink with swirls of sandy blue. Sapnap has no idea what it is so he leaves it where he found it and flips the journal open.

The first page is a recipe for a potion of swiftness, notes penned into the margins, measurements scribbled out and replaced with other numbers. There are doodles at the bottom of different ingredients, the netherwart a realistic and skilled rendition and the sugar just a squiggly, labeled lump. The next is a recipe for an upgraded swiftness potion with more notes and doodles. Each page introduces a new potion recipe - swiftness, endurance, lava resistance, regeneration, healing - before transitioning into poisons with just as many notes and doodles, descriptions of effects. Sapnap can't stop reading. He knew Karl brewed and he'd been in his brewing room plenty of times. He'd used potions Karl had brewed before.

He hadn't known that Karl could brew poisons, too. It had just never occurred to him, but obviously, Karl was adept at it. Experienced enough to have opinions on the general recipes, enough to sketch out ingredients, enough to know effects and time limits.

Does Karl think about poison brewing often? These pages are well-creased and loved, the sketches careful and not as loose-lined as the ones denoting potion ingredients. Karl has even starred the potion of weakness recipe, written down thoughts on testing out fermenting times to change the strength of the effect.

The last page, the ink darkest, freshest, is a potion of poison.

Sapnap thinks about how often Karl offers to make dinner, the enthusiasm he has about them taste-testing, and feels sick. He closes the journal and carefully latches it shut again.

A creak of footsteps on the floor has him shoving the book inside the bag just as Karl walks through the door, ruffling his hair.

“Oh!” Karl smiles, “How’d you know I was looking for that?”

“You leave it all over the place.” Sapnap says, tongue heavy, “You’re always looking for it, Karl.”

“Fair.” Karl laughs and then he seems to pick up on Sapnap’s movements as he tries to subtly pull his hands from inside. “Were you looking for something, Mr. Nosy?”

“A pen.” Sapnap lies. “I wanted to write with your quill.”

“I’m going to make a quill for each of you so you’ll leave mine alone,” Karl comes over and opens the bag in Sapnap’s lap to look inside curiously. “Boy, I really should clean this thing out.”

Sapnap stays quiet. He lets Karl pick through the bag, pulling out the scraps of paper, the coin purse, the hand-made journal. When he pulls the quill out, it’s with a proud flourish. Despite the upset churning Sapnap’s stomach, the fear starting to brew deep inside of him, he can’t help but be just a little bit enamored with how fondly Karl looks at a simple pen.

“Here it is! And the feather isn’t even crushed.” Karl winks, “It’s the enchantment. Here you go, hotstuff. Enjoy your writing.”

Sapnap takes the quill.

“Thank you.” He says.

“Just toss it back in when you’re done for me, okay?” Karl pops a kiss to his forehead before gathering up the scraps of paper, purse, and journal. “I’m gonna take this stuff to my brewing room. No point in keeping a journal if it’s not in the lab!”

“Yeah.” Sapnap says.

Karl leaves in the same whirlwind he came in and Sapnap watches him go, trying not to think about what he’d read.

That night, he tells Karl he’s not feeling well when dinner time rolls around and goes to lie in the dark of their room on his own while the others eat.

Every day for the past week, Sapnap has looked at the people he loves most in the world, and wonders how they are going to kill him.

He has tried to ignore all the sirens and red flags, bubbling up in waves from the remnants of nightmares. He’s trying, but they’re so loud now. He can’t stop thinking, for all that his brain feels like he’s dragging each of his thoughts through mud before he can vocalize them. Karl flips

through a book and Sapnap can't help but worry it's another enchanted message, off to some invisible enemy. Quackity retreats into his room when the house gets too loud, sometimes, and Sapnap has to force himself to sit downstairs, to not run and make sure that Schlatt hasn't crawled out of the Nether and forced himself into their home again. Dream disappears to wander the grounds, let himself be surrounded by green leaves and fresh air and Sapnap can't sit still until he's back in the house. George leaves the room and it's like he takes all the air with him until Sapnap sets eyes on him again. Dream has reclaimed Nightmare, but it sits in a case downstairs alongside Shlong and when he can't sleep at night, Sapnap has taken to lifting it from the scabbard, letting the handle rest in his palm; cool but no longer the same ice that he was familiar with. It's like Schlong can sense that Sapnap feels more connected to Nightmare despite the bond he has with his own sword, and it, in turn, rejects him. The pommel is cool when he touches Schlong, not quite frosty, but cold in its displeasure.

Quackity waves at them from an upstairs window and Sapnap spends the next two hours surreptitiously watching the surrounding woods for any signs of a possible ambush. George and Dream leave to bed, heads bowed together and giggling and Sapnap stays in the sitting room for hours after the lights have turned off, making sure they can't run off again while he's pretending to sleep. Karl cooks dinner and Sapnap lies and says he's snacked all day and isn't hungry, in case Karl has slipped something into the soup. He goes to the forest during the day and roasts wild rabbits over a small fire to keep up his strength, but he becomes sure that even the wild game aren't safe from poison.

He knows it's stupid. He knows. He knows that Karl and Quackity are still so, so guilty, still trying to make it up to him and prove themselves, that they came for him and stood by him as he got his best friends back. He knows that Dream and George wouldn't even think about leaving.

He knows, but that doesn't stop him from being suspicious.

Sapnap sits on the porch, the word *home* bitter in his mouth, Nightmare in his hand, cold in its disapproval of being held by someone who is not its owner, and he wonders whether the threat is coming from inside or outside the house.

They're chopping carrots in the kitchen when all of Sapnap's attempts to keep his troubles to himself get dragged violently into the harsh light of day.

He's doing his best, relying on old instincts to keep himself running on a few hours of scraped together sleep, but Karl and Quackity have caught on that something is up, that he *knows* that they're contemplating another attempt on him.

He's exhausted but he doesn't miss their concerned looks, the worry on their faces when they think he isn't looking, when he trips or stumbles or messes up. It sends a hot blast of embarrassment through him; the only heat he can really get anymore. Even their arms aren't as warm as they once were - not that he's been able to let himself be held the last few days. It seems that all that is left is the shame, and the fear, and the bone-deep knowledge that something is going to happen and he's going to hurt for it.

Anyway; chopping carrots. Sapnap has been helping make dinner every night now, so he can keep an eye on exactly what goes into each dish, and he's chopping carrots while Karl peels potatoes and Quackity sits at the kitchen table, a book open in front of him and a quill pen in his hand. Every so often, Quackity will look at them and then back at his book and he'll scribble something quickly in place. Every glance makes Sapnap's shoulders rise higher.

It's nothing, he tries to convince himself. Quackity's old book didn't even require writing to work,

he just had to open it. Quackity is smart. If he wanted to - sell them out, or whatever, he'd be more subtle about it than just laying his enchanted book out at the table and reporting on them right in front of them.

Logic. No matter what weird thoughts Sapnap has been having, he just has to be logical about it. Logically, Quackity wouldn't even *need* to sell them out. He has no one to report on them *to*. Schlatt was banished to the Nether. What, is he keeping *Wilbur* apprised of their movements? Everyone already knows where they are and they aren't doing anything secretly. Sapnap is just making dinner and Karl is helping.

It's just a simple dinner.

But if it's just a simple dinner, then why is Quackity *writing* so much?

He finishes one carrot and adds it to the pile before he pulls his next one and starts to carefully peel the skin. Quackity scratches another line out, eyes peeking at them before returning to the book. Karl peels potatoes, seemingly oblivious to both of them.

"What are you writing?" Sapnap asks before he even realizes he's speaking. Quackity's pen stops. So does Sapnap's knife.

"Uh," Quackity hesitates. "Nothing."

Sapnap sees the ink on the page, even if he can't read the words. Quackity is lying. Why is Quackity lying?

"Can I see?" He tries again, keeping his voice light. There's a reason. There's a reason, for sure, and Sapnap just needs to - relax. Trust. Quackity *isn't* trying to hurt him, no matter what Sapnap's brain is trying to tell him. He's just tired, and still adjusting to the new normal without his flame being as it once was.

Quackity closes the book, dropping his eyes to the floor. "Uh, maybe...maybe later."

Sapnap's hand flexes around the knife as the suspicion boils up. "Are you being shy, Q?"

"No." Quackity scoffs, "I'm just...nothing."

Sapnap tries to drop it. He goes back to chopping. Quackity doesn't reopen the book. Karl continues to peel potatoes.

"It's just, dude, I could see the words." Sapnap stops chopping, laying the knife down. His fingers ache, the tips numb from cold. They keep the whole house so *fucking* cold. Like they know, like they're trying to force him to admit that he can't keep himself warm anymore.

"I'm just working on something." Quackity admits, slowly twirling the quill in his hands. The feather looks like it came from his own wings and he strokes it carefully as he talks. Sapnap watches, trying to remember the calm that always washed over him when Quackity asked him to help him preen. They hadn't done that in days and days, now. Did that mean something? Was Quackity trying to tell him that he knew Sapnap was keeping secrets, too, and he didn't trust Sapnap to help him anymore? Or was he just pulling away? Didn't want to entrust himself to people he would be leaving? Betraying?

"Working on *what*?"

"Just drop it!" Quackity frowns, finally looking up to meet his eyes. "I don't wanna talk about it."

"Considering our history with books, you can see why maybe I want us to fucking talk about it, Quackity." Sapnap says and maybe it comes out harsher than he meant it to, but he can't take it back. Quackity flinches like Sapnap had fully thrown his knife at him and there's a sharp *clang* as Karl drops the potato he was peeling and it lands hard into his cutting board, knocking the whole thing off the counter and sending peeled potatoes rolling across the floor.

"*Sapnap.*" Karl says, voice cracking.

"What!?"

"I -" Quackity stutters and then shakes his head rapidly, "Holy fuck, dude."

"Are you okay?" Karl sets his peeler down, coming around the counter and closer to Sapnap, "What's wrong?"

"*Nothing.*" Sapnap says vehemently, "I just want to know what's going in the fucking book."

"Okay, but that was, like, really uncalled for." Karl frowns and his eyes - fuck, his eyes are so sad. Sapnap hates how expressive Karl is, how easily he's read through his eyes when he lets himself be seen. Sapnap hurt him and his eyes are starting to get wet, the tip of his nose going pink. "If you wanna talk about something, we can, but you don't need to just attack, right?"

"*Attack?*" Sapnap repeats, "You think I was attacking him?"

"Well, I wouldn't call randomly implying that he's writing in an enchanted book a kind gesture, Sapnap."

"Hey," Quackity stands up, too, "It's okay! It's okay, he's right, Karl. Books are a sore spot, it's fine. Here, you can see it. It's just...just stupid ramblings. Just thoughts, like a journal, I guess."

Quackity picks up the book, holds it out to Sapnap. His hands are shaking, though, and it makes the book tremble slightly in the space between them. Guilt and shame, anger, resentment - all of it roils under Sapnap's skin. He doesn't want Quackity to just *give in*. He wants Quackity to snap back, say something mean, do something to make all the rage actually make *sense*. The smell of cheap liquor begins to fill the room.

"You're scared." Sapnap wrinkles up his nose, the smell of it overwhelming in the closed kitchen, "*Stop.*"

"Sorry." Quackity says immediately, fingers tightening around the book, the smell getting stronger, "I'll stop."

"*Stop, Quackity!*"

"Don't yell at him, Sapnap, that won't help!"

"I'm not *yelling!*" Sapnap yells and Quackity drops the book, a dull thud as it hits the ground.

"Sorry." Quackity says tightly, voice high as he kneels down to pick it up, "Sorry, I'll, um, just - give me a second, okay? It's fine, I just -"

"It's not fine." Karl says firmly, "Sapnap, something is wrong. Something has *been* wrong. You've been off for weeks and now you're getting angry out of nowhere. *Please* just talk to us!"

"It's not out of nowhere!"

"You're right. It's coming from somewhere." Karl peers at Sapnap, eyes gray and all-seeing and deep. Sapnap knows that if he lets Karl look for too long, he'll see the dying coals where his inner flame once burned bright.

When Sapnap just glares, Karl heaves a sigh that is more movement than breathing and goes to Quackity's side. Quackity doesn't look at him or at Sapnap, eyes firmly on the floor.

Karl crouches, offering his hand, but Quackity flinches back hard enough to fall back on himself, still not looking at him.

"No, thank you." Quackity says quietly.

"Fuck." Sapnap throws his hands up. He feels his body heating up for the first time in what he thinks could be months at this point, his flame finally flaring up. It hurts, after so long, feels like it's using his insides for kindling but he's so glad for the heat that he doesn't care. It can burn him hollow, if only it chases away the chill. "Why are you fucking *scared of us!*?"

"I'm not fucking scared of you!" Quackity finally snaps back, "You're just yelling, okay!? I'm scared of the yelling, not of fucking you, Sapnap! Just stop yelling!"

"No!" Sapnap hurls back, "I'm fucking angry, I'm allowed to yell!"

"Okay, then I'm allowed to be scared!"

"Scared of *what!*?" Sapnap throws his arms wide and Quackity flinches back again, only fueling Sapnap's agitation, "What do you have to be scared of, here!? Schlatt is *dead*, Quackity!"

"Don't say his name." Quackity flickers his eyes up at him, just a glancing glare, "D-don't -"

"Why? He can't do shit to any of us! Schlatt is in the Nether, we're out here! But you still smell like liquor when you're scared and you're scared *all the fucking time*, Quackity!"

"That isn't fair." Quackity says quietly, his breathing starting to quicken, "That isn't fucking fair, Sapnap, that isn't fucking - that isn't *fair* -"

"*Sapnap.*" Karl interrupts them both, standing up again and staring straight at Sapnap. "Be angry with us over what happened. It's okay. It's okay if you're angry with us about that for the rest of our lives, I understand. But this? This is fucked up. You know what that man did. You need to calm down."

"Calm down?" Sapnap laughs, incredulous, "You don't smell it, Karl. You don't smell it, you don't understand *anything*. You just stand there and watch it all and you're *apart* from it."

"I know." Karl agrees easily, always so fucking easy, he just nods and says the right words and disarms Sapnap, just like he did when they first met. He made Sapnap fall in love with him even while he hid something so important. What could he still be hiding? What has Sapnap let himself be blind to just because he loved him, loved them? What else is Sapnap missing?

"You *don't know*, stop saying that!"

"I don't know." Karl agrees again. "I don't know what either of you are going through. But my job isn't to know, Sap, it's to be here and to listen and to love you."

"Maybe I don't *want* you to do those things!"

Karl takes a deep breath and holds it for a familiar count.

"Maybe you don't right now." Karl breathes out. "But I'm here for when and if you do. I need you to stop yelling at Quackity, though, okay? Just yell at me if you need to."

"Fuck you." Sapnap hisses, "Fuck you and your *martyr complex*, whatever the *fuck* this is -"

"Stop." Quackity practically begs, "I'm sorry. This is my fault, okay? I'm sorry, please stop,"

"Don't talk to me like I'm Schlatt!"

"Then stop *acting like Schlatt!*" Quackity yells back and Sapnap realizes he's plastered himself under the table, keeping Karl between them.

His words hit Sapnap like the imaginary blade he'd thrown earlier being shot back. Sapnap feels the force of it, the cheap liquor stench so overpowering it makes his head spin. His flame, eating up his insides to sustain itself, runs out of fuel as Quackity's words gut him and leave him empty. His warmth abruptly fades back to what it was and then, somehow, keeps fading. Sapnap feels the barely-burning coals in him finally go out.

It's - Sapnap doesn't have words. It's like he had been *cold*, the tips of his fingers and his toes and his nose all painfully chilled, and he thought that was uncomfortable - and now he's *frigid* like he's never been before. It's like every inch of him is submerged in ice, the breath punching from his lungs, his heart rate dropping, his teeth chattering.

"Sap..." Karl takes a step toward him, hands raised like he's calming a rabid animal and Sapnap wants to rage and yell and shriek and punch and *run* all at the same time but the tundra inside of him allows him to feel nothing but panic. He stumbles back, away from Karl's touch.

"Don't touch me -" Sapnap snaps, "D-Don't touch me, how could you think - how could you *think* -"

"You're scaring us, Sap." Karl says and Sapnap *recognizes* that tone, it's the fucking voice Karl uses when he's trying to talk someone down, when he's trying to talk *Sapnap* down but Sapnap doesn't fucking need calming down, he needs some fucking understanding, he needs trust, he needs - he needs something that he doesn't think he'll ever get from Karl and Quackity.

"*Fuck you,*" Sapnap hurls back, "*Fuck you, fuck you, Quackity, fuck you, Karl, fuck you both, I hate you, I f-f-fucking hate you, you're the w-w-worst thing that has ever h-happen-happened t-to m-m-me -*"

"Sapnap, you need to breathe -" Karl tries to touch him again and Sapnap just - reacts, smacks Karl's hands away with what strength he has left in his muscles. He's scared, Sapnap realizes. He's - he's terrified - he's terrified, he's so fucking scared, he's alone with them, in a room, and they're scared of him, and they're going to - going to turn their backs on him again, they're going to leave him, they're going to *hurt him*, they're going to -

He needs help. He needs help, he's alone and he's defenseless and he doesn't know what to do and the only person who always knows what to do, how to help is -

"DREAM!" Sapnap screams as loud as he can, "*Dream, Dream!!*"

Karl retreats with his hands up and Sapnap can barely breathe as he stumbles away, eyes desperately searching for the door - all he can think of is Dream, that Dream will save him, Dream will keep him safe, Dream won't let them, won't let anyone, hurt him, Dream -

“Dream!” He sobs, “Dream, where are you!?”

The door is on the other side of Quackity - Sapnap let them *trap him*, it was behind Quackity and Karl the whole time, they were *keeping him here*, just like that cell, just like that cage, they were -

The door bursts open, Dream barrels through without hesitation, George on his heels.

“Sap!?”

“Dream, Dream -” Sapnap sobs, “Dream, I n-need help, I need *help, help -*”

“What did you do?” Dream demands, but he isn’t talking to Sapnap, “What did you two say to him!?”

“Nothing!” Karl takes more steps back, still between the rest of them and Quackity, still - he still thinks Sapnap is a threat, but Sapnap isn’t, Sapnap *isn’t*, “He just - something is *wrong*, Dream!”

“Dream,” Sapnap reaches out and Dream is there, like he always has been, except for those awful, awful months. Big arms wrap around Sapnap and yank him close, enclosing him in a tight, protective hug. Dream is *warm* and comforting and familiar and Sapnap finds himself burying his face in Dream’s shoulder and holding on as tight as he can.

“Dream, calm down.” George says tightly, “Don’t blame them. Something is wrong.”

“Yeah, I shouldn’t have fucking left him in here, *that’s* what’s wrong! I should have come in when he started yelling, what the fuck is going on!?”

“That isn’t what I meant!”

“I want to leave.” Sapnap tugs at Dream, “G-get me out of here, please, please, just -”

“Okay,” Dream says immediately, “Of course, yeah, of course.”

“Wait!” Karl tries to stop them and Sapnap burrows into Dream’s hold, hiding his face so he can’t see when Dream comes to an abrupt stop. Cheap liquor has been joined by *sour*, and he knows it is Karl.

“Karl, move or I’ll move you.” Dream says darkly.

“I just want to know what’s happening.” Karl pleads, “What the hell is going on!?”

“Let them go, Karl.” George steps in and Sapnap peeks in time to see George gently pull Karl out of Dream’s way, “Let Dream go calm Sapnap down. You can talk later.”

Dream doesn’t wait for further conversation. He stomps out of the room and Sapnap goes with him, down only-recently familiar halls and into a room not often used but which Sapnap remembers decorating only last month. It’s Dream’s room, mostly unused and untouched. Dream herds him into the room, slams the door behind them and drops the lock into place.

“You’re safe.” Dream says firmly. “Hey, Pandas. Look at me.”

Reluctantly, Sapnap looks. He can’t get his chest to expand. He feels so cold. He’s frozen from his core, radiating ice. His eyes itch, his teeth ache, his heart pulses with pain.

“You’re safe.” Dream repeats, squeezing Sapnap’s arms, the heat of his hands painful on Sapnap’s bare skin. “I won’t let anyone or anything hurt you. Okay?”

Sapnap nods. He believes him. He's angry at Dream; for the throne, for leaving, for XD, he's *furious* at Dream. But, more than anything, more than anyone right now, he trusts Dream. Dream won't let anything happen to him; George has to be the peacekeeper and Sapnap knows that but Dream? Dream will keep him safe no matter what.

It's that thought, that he's safe in this room, with Dream, behind a locked door, that finally breaks him. With a weak sob, he collapses onto the floor, puts his face in his hands, and bursts into tears.

"Pandas," Dream says, helpless, "Oh, Pandas, Sapnap -"

"I don't -" Sapnap starts, stuttering over sobs, over tears that no longer turned into steam on contact with his skin, "I don't u-understand, I don't get it, I don't, Dream, I don't understand, how could they think that, how could they?"

"Shh," Dream says and Sapnap feels the hand in his hair more than he sees the motion, "Shh, Sapnap. It's alright. I've got you. I've got you."

"I'm not," Sapnap says, his heart an injured animal, limping along with all the grace of a hunter's doomed prey, even as his breath hitches again and again, "He looked at me like I was *him*, like I would - I w-would never, you know I would never, he knows -"

"I know, I know, shhh," Dream says, running his fingers through Sapnap's hair, "I'm here. You're safe."

"I know!" Sapnap explodes, "I know I'm safe, I know Schlatt's dead, I know you're here and you're not gone or fake or a different fucking person, I know and I can't - It still feels so real, all of it, even now, even when I'm safe, all of *that* feels real and none of *this* does. I don't understand, why now? Why here? Why them and George and *you* -"

He cuts himself off with a sob, choking it back as he tries to focus on breathing, on Dream's steady heartbeat, on the things that should prove he's alive. His brain doesn't let him believe it.

Dream just holds him, lets him compose himself despite the questions Sapnap is sure he has. Every time he tries to calm down, the sobs work their way up his throat like thorns, until he is choking on sharp spines once more.

"D-Dream," He manages to get out, and the admission that falls from him now is shameful, makes his cheeks burn and embarrassment forcing him to hide his face from his best friend, "Dream, are you real?"

"Sap," Dream says, heartbroken, "Yes, yes, I'm real, you're real, we're both here, we're both alive."

"Then why," Sapnap asks, even as the voice inside him that sounds like Schlatt, sounds like Quackity, flat and broken whispers *pathetic pathetic pathetic*, "Why now? I don't *understand*, I don't get it; It's so dumb, it's so fucking stupid -"

"No, it's not." Dream shuts down, firm. "It's not dumb. You were on the run for six months, Sap. You barely slept, barely ate, operating in fight or flight at every hour of the day."

"But I'm happy now." Sapnap whispers, a dead man's confession, "I was *happy*."

"You're safe," Dream replies, gentle, "You're safe, Pandas, and you're only just registering it. You've been running for so long. Your body doesn't know how to handle it. It's alright."

"I -" Sapnap tries to speak but his throat closes up, making the words feel heavier than Atlas's burden. He's so fucking tired; of being scared, of being panicked, of hating the others, of needing the others, of everything that his body is forcing him to go through despite how he should be happy. He's so tired.

He curls into Dream's comforting warmth, nestling his head over his friend's heart like they did when they were kids. He pulls Dream's hands so that they encircle him again, and sighs in relief as he leeches Dream's warmth and it starts to chase the cold away. There's something wrong here, but his heart is beating slower and all his panic has been used up already.

"Sapnap," Dream says, and there's a thread to his voice that wasn't there before, a concern laced in with how soft he's trying to keep his voice, "Sapnap, your hands are cold."

Sapnap just hums. It feels like, finally, pressed into Dream's warmth, all of the thoughts of panic and fear and the confusing feelings of Karl and Quackity and George have been chased out of his head. A discordant note rings in the back of his mind.

"You're...you're not supposed to be cold, Sapnap."

Dream. Right. Dream is talking. He's talking, so Sapnap should listen. Something tightens in his heart.

"I think," Sapnap says, and the words slur, stumble and fall on their way out of his mouth, "Dream, I'm cold."

"Alright, alright, okay -" Dream sounds panicked, worried, and he shouldn't be, he shouldn't, Sapnap needs to protect them, help him, it's what he's here for, but his limbs are stiff and his eyes are heavy.

"I want my dad," he finally says, feeling all of eight years old again, alone in a barracks with only Dream for company, "Dee, I wan' my dad."

Dream might reply. He doesn't know if he does. Sapnap is already slipping away.

Dream is loath to leave Sapnap but he isn't equipped to handle what is happening. He needs backup and resources.

Sapnap is fully unconscious when Dream tries to move him. He's dead weight, all muscle that Dream has to lift off the ground and get into the bed; it's a struggle but Dream manages to heft him over his shoulder and stand up. That he's actually able to is a worry. Sapnap should be too dense for Dream to pick up like this - it means he's lost mass and Dream doesn't - he can't think about that.

He manages to pull the blankets back and settle Sapnap between the sheets, tuck him in and pull all the extra bedding from the storage in the closet out to drape over him, too. Sapnap has always been minimalist in his bedding but Dream pulls pillows out and stuffs them under the blankets and around Sapnap's body for extra insulation.

He goes to the fireplace, too. It's hot outside today but he still banks the hearth and makes sure the flue is open before he strikes a match and starts the fire.

From the moment Sapnap had fallen unconscious, he'd been shivering. Even under the blankets, with the thick windows shut and the fire quickly raising the temperature of the room, he shivers in Dream's bed.

"More blankets." Dream says to himself and strides to the door. When he opens it, he's unsurprised to find all three other members of the house waiting.

Quackity sits, head in hands, on the floor between George and Karl, who have their heads bent together as they whisper.

When Dream opens the door, all three of them look at him, worried eyes and down-turned lips all around.

"Is he okay?" Quackity shoots to his feet, "Can I talk to him?"

"He isn't okay." Dream tries to remind himself that whatever just happened was not Quackity or Karl's fault. Sapnap has been off for weeks, refusing to talk about it and dodging concern, and it's just culminated in - this. A heated argument. Dream is familiar enough with an angry Sapnap to know the sort of tongue-lashings he can dish out. Whatever happened, Sapnap probably wasn't an innocent party.

Still, it's hard. His best friend *cried*. Dream hasn't seen Sapnap cry like that in - not since they were kids, probably.

But Quackity looks like he's been crying, too, and Karl isn't much better. George peeks around Dream's shoulder, looking one moment of weakness away from just shoving Dream out of the way.

"Something's wrong," he settles on saying. "I need you guys to help."

"Whatever you need." Karl says immediately, "What do we need to do?"

"I need someone to write to Bad and Skeppy. I think...Sapnap is *cold*. I think something's wrong with his flame, so we need Bad and Skeppy."

"I'll do that." George volunteers, "What else?"

"I need more blankets." Dream settles on, "And warm soup or something, we need to make sure he has as much energy as possible so a really, I dunno, nutritious broth or something."

"I can make soup." Karl turns on his heels to head back toward the kitchen and then stops and turns back around, face nervous, as he waits for any other requests.

"I'll get blankets," Quackity tugs at his sleeves thoughtlessly, "And I'll go get more wood for the fire. It should be warm, right? We need to keep him warm?"

"Yeah," Dream tries to remember when Sapnap was sick when they were children; he'd only been able to eat thin soup, stuff Skeppy had made with lots of minerals and nutrients and - and Dream hadn't paid any fucking attention to the *soup*, he'd been helping Bad keep Sapnap warm or pulling double duty with George since he couldn't escape *all* of his princely duties. Fuck. "Yes, yeah. Really warm. Like sweltering."

"Okay." Quackity nods and then practically runs away. George waits until Karl is gone too and then gives Dream a knowing look.

"He really isn't okay?"

Dream wordlessly shakes his head and lets George push past him and into the room to see for himself. He doesn't need to watch, he knows that George sits on the edge of the bed and just *looks*,

always observing, before he walks back out with purpose to go find a pen and paper.

Dream takes the next few minutes that he's alone to crouch in the corner of the room and freak the fuck out. He has no idea what the fuck he's doing; he can't remember much from that time except that Bad had made sure the room was so hot it had been dangerous for him and George to stay as long as they often did, that Skeppy had made special soup and forced it into Sapnap every chance he got, and that they *needed* Bad to fix the problem. All Dream can do here is make sure the room is hot and hope that Karl's somehow been keeping a soup recipe especially good for inner flame strengthening in his back pocket alongside all the other random stuff he tends to carry around. Even if George sends the letter now and it somehow makes it to Kinoko by morning, Kinoko is still a week's hard ride away. They'll have to manage for a *week* and Dream isn't even confident that they'll manage for the night.

Dream smacks himself in the face a few times, forces the burning in his eyes to go away and makes himself breathe deep and slow - seven seconds in, eleven out.

By the time he hears someone coming back down the hall, he's collected himself. He stands up to meet whoever it is and finds that Quackity is the first back. He's carrying an armload of logs from outside, most probably chopped by Sapnap himself.

"Just put them by the fire," Dream motions and returns to Sapnap's side, sitting on the edge of the bed to put a hand on his forehead. Even with how hot the room is getting and the blankets, Sapnap hasn't even broken a sweat. He's still chilled under Dream's touch.

"Is he...?" Quackity bites his lip and steps closer to the bed. Dream bites back his instinctive urge to make him back off. Every person in this house loves Sapnap and is worried about him. Dream isn't alone in this. Quackity just wants to check on Sapnap for himself. Though the thought doesn't completely remove the urge, it does allow him to step aside so Quackity can see Sapnap buried under all the blankets.

"Oh." Quackity's hand shakes where it hovers over Sapnap. Dream watches him decide not to touch, pull his hand away and take a step back. "I'll go get blankets."

"He'll be okay." Dream says despite himself, wanting to reassure, "He's...he's Sapnap. He'll be okay."

"Of course he will be." Quackity steps away from the bed, practically backing out of the room just so he can keep watching Sapnap breathing shallowly. "Blankets."

"Blankets." Dream agrees and tries not to wince when Quackity finally turns away.

George returns before Quackity does with the blankets.

"We used one of Karl's emergency message enchantments to get a hold of his guild. They're going to track down Bad." George says upon entering the room. Dream has been building up the fire since Quackity left and he turns around in time to watch George start to strip down.

"What are you..." Dream asks even as his brain makes the connection. George doesn't bother answering, just gets down to his boxers and then climbs into the bed with Sapnap and dragging all of the blankets and bedding back up after him.

"Go help Karl, Dream." George wraps himself around Sapnap and doesn't seem bothered by the cold at all.

"I can stay."

“It’s going to be hot in here.” George says and Dream doesn’t understand why that would mean he needs to go help Karl until the fire begins to truly crackle and he feels viscerally as if he is about to throw up. It’s getting hotter and hotter in the room. Dream has started to sweat without realizing it. He blinks and sees red brick on his eyelids.

“I’ll go help Karl.” Dream stands properly and brushes his knees off shakily. “Quackity will be back with more...”

“Soup, Dream.” George points to the door, voice gentle. “I have Sap. Go make sure those two don’t lose it, okay? They’re scared.”

I’m scared. Dream doesn’t say. He goes to help with the soup.

He’s stopped at the door by the sight of Karl and Quackity, standing together in the kitchen now while a pot boils away on the stove and a pile of blankets sits on the table.

“ - my fault.” Quackity says as Dream freezes.

“It’s not.” Karl says firmly. “We knew this was coming, baby. Not *this*, but we knew he’d have to work through it with us. We’ll get through it.”

“He *hates* us,” Quackity wobbles out, “He said we were the worst thing that’s ever -”

“He didn’t mean that.” Karl brings Quackity’s hands up and kisses his knuckles. Dream feels like he needs to turn around and walk away, but George told him to help with the soup. “You know he didn’t. He loves us. He loves *you*. You know he adores you.”

“I should have thought about what it would look like.” Quackity tugs his hands away, “I should have. It was dumb, of course books would freak him out, what was I *thinking*? ”

“Q, stop.” Karl puts his hands on Quackity’s shoulders, grip loose. “Something is wrong. Sapnap wasn’t acting like himself. If it wasn’t the book, it would have been something else. But he’s going to be okay, and we’ll work it out. We’re strong enough to come out of this better for it, okay?”

Quackity just shakes his head, shoulders shaking under Karl’s hands, and Dream takes a few steps back down the hallway and then walks forward much louder than before, deliberately making himself known.

When he walks into the kitchen this time, Karl is stirring the pot and Quackity is folding the blankets and picking them up.

“George will help you put those on.” Dream says as casually as he can to Quackity and Quackity, not meeting his eyes, nods and skirts around him to leave.

When Dream turns back to Karl, he finds that Karl is looking at him.

“Sit.” Karl nods at the table and Dream goes. Karl brings him a glass of water and Dream drains it. His fingers shake.

“Sorry.” Dream says. He didn’t think he’d gotten away with it; people rarely got away with anything when Karl was around, even if he didn’t call them out.

“It’s okay.” Karl touches his fingertips to Dream’s arm, “Q didn’t see you. Just, uh...back away faster next time, okay?”

“Sorry.” Dream says again and drinks the water when Karl refills his glass. Karl puts a chopping board of half-chopped carrots in front of him when he’s done and Dream spends the next hours carefully dicing vegetables for Karl to put into the stock on the stove and racking his brain for what Skeppy may have mentioned those years ago.

The hours pass. The soup is finished. The day ends. The night begins. George doesn’t leave the bed. Quackity doesn’t go back into the room. Karl jockeys all over the mansion fetching things for George. Dream has to take breaks, the heat of the room finally approaching sufficient levels for Sapnap as the fire continues to be fed, but quickly overwhelming him. He feels sick. Everyone seems to fall asleep around the same time - late, late into the night, or even very early in the morning. Dream sits in the corner of the room so he has a view of both the bed and the closed door, and can’t sleep, so he thinks.

Sapnap fills a big space. He’s been half of Dream’s heart for most of Dream’s life; he’s been one of Dream’s top priorities since before he could even pick up a sword. Before the worst night of Dream’s life, Dream often couldn’t go more than a few hours without either George or Sapnap finding him to whine about some problem or another for him to help with. Sometimes, the problem was as simple as a broken piece of equipment or being bored; sometimes, it was harder. No matter the problem, Dream loved them so he fixed it.

The Sapnap that Dream knows now is so different from the one he knew two years ago; Dream loves him the same and he’s still *Sapnap*, but he’s different. Quieter, heavier. His grief had etched permanent bags under his eyes even after days and days of good sleep. He isn’t loud anymore; even when his voice is raised, he wears an invisible funerary shroud. Dream sometimes feels like he’s still dead, even standing right in front of his friends.

Sapnap doesn’t call for Dream anymore. Like he internalized that Dream wasn’t there to fix his problems anymore just as Dream was finally able to do it again. He misses the way Sapnap used to say his name; a greeting, light, full of their history. Sapnap says his name like he’s not used to saying it, now; like his tongue has lost the shape.

When he’d heard Sapnap call for him earlier, it had been a decade of instinct that found him rushing to the kitchen; Sapnap had a problem, and Sapnap knew he could call Dream and Dream would come. Dream had come, and Dream had fixed it - he’d thought. Except he hadn’t, not really.

Dream can’t fix this. Dream couldn’t even fully get it together enough to fix the room. He’d needed George to take over, be the rational one. Dream is used to George picking up his slack, he has a lot of it and no one fits his jagged edges quite like the soothing flow of George, but it stings this time. Finally, a chance to show Sapnap that he can still be here for him, be his brother, and he’d failed.

Dream puts his face in his hands and doesn’t sleep.

The next three days pass in a rhythm. George only gets out of the bed to use the bathroom and take short breaks outside the heat; he runs hotter than Karl and Quackity and, unlike Dream, is able to withstand the heat of the room for longer periods of time. Karl keeps the stock boiling, the broth richer every day, and he and George work together to force Sapnap to wake up enough to drink it at least three times a day. Quackity takes on the household responsibilities usually split between the five of them - takes care of the gardens, cleans the kitchen, makes the food runs to the village when shopping day rolls around and Dream can’t make himself leave.

Dream is useless. It’s all he can do to make sure George is drinking plenty of water to replace what he’s sweating out, relieving him when he needs breaks. Sapnap is finally lukewarm, temperature dropping every time Dream and George switch out but otherwise holding steady. He wakes up only when heavily jostled and Dream can tell he isn’t fully aware when it happens. His eyes are glazed

when he opens them, pain apparent in the scrunch of his brows and bow of his lips.

Dream chops wood when he isn't reading aloud or doing something else to entertain George while he keeps Sapnap warm or fetching water. Sapnap had created quite the stock but the constant roaring fire in the room at all hours of the day would quickly burn through it if they weren't careful so Dream lugs logs and chops and carries armfuls to the fire.

He doesn't sleep. He can't. Every time he closes his eyes, he sees skeletons with bows and floating monsters, hears their screaming and the cackling of bones and arrows, smells the sulfur. If he sleeps, he's terrified he'll wake up from this dream and be back there. So he doesn't sleep. He drinks tea and chops wood and carries water and checks on Sapnap and helps Quackity and Karl as best he can around the house.

Dream is useless for three days before, as the sun begins to set on Sapnap's third day unconscious, he sees dust in the distance.

Somehow, instinctively, he knows.

"Bad and Skeppy are here!" he yells from the chopping block, dropping the axe and gathering up the wood he'd just freshly chopped. He dumps it on the pile, grabs two bundles he'd pre-tied and dashes into the house to alert the others, "They're here!"

"Already!?" Karl pops out of the kitchen when Dream goes to find him, deep bowl of broth in his hands, a cloth protecting his palms from the heat. "How...?"

"I don't know." Dream fast-walks with him, careful not to bump into him and risk spilling the soup, "But I saw it. They'll be here soon."

"Did you say they were here?" George demands the moment Dream opens the bedroom door. Quackity is there, too, with fresh water for George, and he brings his eyes off the ground for what feels like the first time in days to look at Dream in surprise.

"I saw their dust." Dream confirms, "They must have ridden through the night. Speed potions, even, maybe."

"Go get them!" George points, "Quackity can feed the fire. Karl, Skeppy might have a better recipe for food. Let's just give him a little and then we'll do whatever Skeppy says for food next time."

Dream, relieved, hands the wood off to Quackity and turns on his heels. What would he do without George? He'd be lost, that's what.

Dream is barely into the foyer when the doors blow open.

"Dream! You're okay? Your friend found us but couldn't tell us anything! Where is my son?!" Bad demands as he storms into the mansion with all the grace and force of a natural disaster.

Dream can't help the instinctual relief that comes from seeing Bad; Dream has never had a father and George's had been distant, too sad to truly bond with him. Bad and Skeppy both had taken him and George under their wing as they'd raised Sapnap. Even the sight of Bad is enough to bring on tears. Dream also can't help the very childish thought of *oh gods, what have I done* as he resists the urge to hide his hands behind his back as though he'd just done something he knew he was going to get into trouble for.

Guilt pools in his stomach as the image of Sapnap's face, desperately crying out for him with an expression of pure terror that Dream had never seen on his friend, and he thinks, *I have done*

something wrong.

Skeppy follows mere moments later. While Bad looks almost overwhelmingly concerned, Skeppy looks downright thunderous. He marches up to Dream, looks him over once and then nods to himself as Bad comes forward.

“Thank the gods.” Dream accepts Bad’s hands on his upper arms, lets Bad pull him into a tight, comforting hug and doesn’t bother stepping out of the way of Bad’s anxiously thrashing tail, “Fuck, thank the gods you’re here. He’s in my room.”

“What happened?” Bad asks, “Were you guys attacked?”

“No,” Dream shakes his head as he leads them up the stairs of the foyer and down the corridors leading to the occupied rooms, “We don’t know what - we didn’t *know*, he was acting weird but we just thought it was the stress settling and then - and then three days ago, he just - he’s so *cold* -”

Dream can’t continue, choked up.

“Dream,” Skeppy says, and lays a hand on his elbow as they pull up short outside the door to Dream’s room. “How bad is it?”

Dream swallows. “It’s... It’s bad, Scep. It’s really bad.”

Even saying the words makes the air, crackling with the energy of a full fire demon, go cold, the oxygen sucked out. It’s hard for a fire demon to go pale, but Bad does, and behind him, Skeppy’s bravado turns into almost imperceptible shaking.

“Show me.” Bad says, voice deadly serious, and Dream opens the door.

The room is as warm as they could make it; the fire is piled high, the window shuttered and packed with blankets so that no heat could escape. Karl’s cloak is only the latest of all the blankets lying across Sapnap, as many of them as they could find piled high on top of him. George lays under it all, as the final stop gate, sweaty and red-faced while Quackity continues to feed the fire and Karl helps George slip spoonfuls of broth between Sapnap’s lips.

Underneath it all, Sapnap still shivers, face drawn and pale and the last of his energy being spent on the chattering of his teeth between spoonfuls. Skeppy sucks in a sharp breath.

“Bad,” George says and Dream hates how his voice cracks as he finally allows the weakness to show, allows the princely facade he’s worn for three days to come down. “Help.”

“Oh, Pandas, *kiddo*,” Bad says weakly as he crosses into the sweltering room and presses the back of his hand to Sapnap’s forehead. Dream watches the way Sapnap seems to bloom under the touch, his eyes opening for what Dream feels like is the first time since he fainted.

“Sapnap,” Bad says, and he sounds like he’s already grieving and something deep and cold in the pit of Dream’s heart creeps and shudders against the rising tide of fear that has him sagging against the open doorway with no strength left in his body. The world spins, the floor dips and gives way, the firelight flickers, and Bad says, “Okay...okay, George. Thank you for your hard work but Skeppy needs to take over now. Scep, I need you to support him in sitting upright, okay?”

Skeppy and George nod at the same time without asking any questions. Karl whisks the bowl and chair out of the way and George crawls out of the cocoon of blankets, damp from head to toe. Dream helps him when he stumbles, skin so warm it’s uncomfortable to even touch, as Skeppy slides into George’s place.

Dream can only watch Sapnap; limp, pale, *tiny* as Skeppy arranges him in his arms. Skeppy is the one that propped him up and it's clear that Skeppy is the one keeping him up, too. Sapnap's head lolls forward, his hair falling over his eyes. All at once, Dream can feel the chill of that winter when they were fourteen, can feel the weight of Sapnap in his arms when he carried him through the snow after he collapsed. The ache of days sitting on the floor of Sapnap's recovery room, George leaning on his shoulder as they watched Bad feed Sapnap's fire and smooth out his hair. The relief when, even still pale-cheeked and with shaky legs, Sapnap had grinned at them and said, "You didn't think I'd go down that easy, did you?"

There's none of that spark left in Sapnap now. He lays in his father's arms and looks worlds away from the cocky teenager who, by Bad's own admittance, had been too stubborn to die.

Sapnap's eyes flutter.

"...Da'...?" It's barely a whisper, a hissing breath of syllables, but it's the first thing Sapnap has said since he collapsed in Dream's arms, so much colder than he ever should be. The first thing he's said since Dream held him, and wondered if he had just lost his brother forever.

"Hey, kiddo," Bad says, relief making his voice crack and splinter in his throat, even as he keeps his voice achingly gentle.

"You.... Y're here...?"

"We're here," Skeppy drops a kiss to the top of Sapnap's hair, "We're here, Pandas"

"...C-cold..."

"I know, Sap," Bad says, steam starting to rise from the corners of his eyes, "We're gonna warm you up. Can I see?"

Sapnap's head drops forward again, and there's a hum that's barely audible. Bad must take it as consent. Dream knows enough to remember that what Bad is doing wouldn't work if Sapnap wasn't willing, even if he is barely conscious. Bad takes a deep breath.

"Keep him grounded, Skeppy," Bad says, and then he leans forward and reaches into Sapnap's chest.

Dream has seen the process before, during that terrible, awful winter, but it doesn't stop the action from feeling unnatural. It's more of a shock as Bad's hands shimmer like the air over hot ground, a haze descending upon them and making them insubstantial, opaque.

When he pulls his hands away, he is cradling something as if it were made of the most precious material in the world, with infinite care and aching devotion.

As he should; it's Sapnap's flame. Or rather, what is left of it. Before, the sight had taken Dream's breath away. It still does now, but not in the same way.

At fourteen, Sapnap's fire had been bubbling and merry; smaller than it should have been, a casualty of the weather and his stubborn refusal to care for himself. Even during the worst days of his sickness, it had still sparked and burst, shooting embers into the air as Dream cracked jokes in an effort to cheer his friend up. It had crackled as it clung to Bad; feeding but not overtaking, and eventually burning in tandem. Sapnap's flame had been made of promises and youth and hope, and it had persisted with a gentle but determined light.

Dream sucks in a horrified breath at the same time Skeppy stifles his. The only way to describe

Sapnap's fire right now is *smoldering*. There's no flame, no heat; just a few gathered embers, the last scrapings of a dying fire, bone white with ash. There is one, perhaps two places where something still flickers; a soft orange raging against the night. But it's fading. It's *fading*.

He barely registers his knees hitting the wooden floor, George dropping down with him, the both of them clinging to each other with bone-deep necessity. Dream can't move, can't speak as Bad cradles the visual proof of how close they came to losing Sapnap forever. How close he came to failing his brother.

"*Pandas*," Bad says, sounding utterly shattered. He runs a still shimmering thumb over the embers, barely brushing the spluttered-out coals. In response to the movement, there is the briefest flare of a soft, hazy orange, but it disappears just as quickly as it rose. In Skeppy's arms, Sapnap shudders, sighs; a long, heavy breath.

"Bad," Skeppy says, low and scared, and fuck, Dream has never heard *Skeppy scared*. "Bad -"

"I need to concentrate, Skeppy." Bad says, pulling himself together enough to have the shattered edges of his words become sharp, and Skeppy shuts up with a sob into Sapnap's hair.

Someone puts a hand on Dream's shoulder. He thinks it's Karl, but Dream can't bear to look away from Bad's work to check.

Bad breathes out, centering himself before, seemingly unbidden, a flame bobs from his chest, illuminating the tableau of worry in a warm light. The contrast is stark between father and son. The flame jumps forward, as if to wrap around Sapnap's, relight it, a match to kindling, but Bad holds it back.

"Careful," He whispers, more to himself than anything, "Gentle."

One hand still cradling Sapnap's embers, he begins to motion over his own flame, winding, unwinding. Dream isn't sure, but somehow, a few moments later, what looks like yarn woven of grey smoke and sunset embers is pulled from Bad's flame.

Then, with endless care, he begins to wrap it around Sapnap's coal. At first, he tucks it up underneath the ash-stricken soul, like kindling on a slowly dying fire. Once the dim glow of yellow and orange becomes persistent, rather than intermittent, he begins to wind it wholly around the ember, taking it slow, almost painfully so, as not to snuff it out entirely. It's akin to a warm scarf on a cold day, Skeppy's secret hot chocolate recipe. Dream feels like he can breathe for the first time since Sapnap became sick. For all the heat in the room, he feels truly warm again.

He sucks in a breath, harsh and grating in his throat. Bad doesn't move, but Skeppy's head whips up and, well, if he had the strength, Dream is sure it would have been a scathing glare. As it is, Skeppy just looks tired.

"Is he," Dream says, breathlessly, terrified of the answer and the look on Skeppy's face, "Is he going to be okay?"

"Leave him with us," Skeppy says, instead of answering, "He needs to be with his family right now."

But he's my brother, Dream wants to shout, wants to scream, *he's my family!* We're *his family!*

"Okay," Karl says, and his voice only cracks a little, "Okay. We'll be just outside, if you need anything at all."

Skeppy nods. "Thank you. For calling us."

Heart breaking in his throat, Dream says, "Of course we called you."

Karl forces both Dream and George onto their feet and leads them out of the room. Dream watches as he closes the door on the sputtering, wan thing that is the remains of Sapnap's heart.

Quackity is already in the hall, crouching with his head between his knees, shoulders shaking.

"It was out." Dream hears him *sob*, "It was *out*, it was *gone* -"

"It wasn't." Karl says simply. "You all saw it. Bad got here in time. He's going to be fine."

"It was almost out." George says, dazed.

"Yes." Karl says, hand still firm on Dream's shoulder, "It was. But it isn't anymore. Come on, everyone to the kitchen. George needs to cool off. I need a drink."

"No drinks." Quackity shakes his head, looking up at them through his hair, "No alcohol. N-not right now."

"No alcohol." Karl agrees and forces all three of them toward the kitchen and away from half of all of their hearts.

"That was cruel, Scep," Bad murmurs, still looping strands of his own fire to cushion and protect the dying embers of his son's heart.

"They did something," Skeppy says, his voice low despite the anger, "Something happened *to our son*, Bad, and now he's... He's -"

"He'll be okay," Bad says.

"Please don't lie to me," Skeppy says, voice cracking at the seams, and Bad finally glances up from his task to look at him.

"He's going to be fine." Bad says, and the steel in his voice almost makes Skeppy believe him. Almost.

Sapnap shifts, sinking further into his father's arms. For the first time, the worry lines on his face seem to smooth, ease out. He looks fourteen again. He's never looked so old.

When had their son grown up so much without them realizing?

"It was supposed to be over." Skeppy strokes Sapnap's hair back, "He wasn't supposed to have to hurt anymore, Bad. That's why he came home."

"We got here in time." Bad stops looping and lifts both flames closer to his face. "That's all we can hope happens. When he needs us, we get here in time."

Skeppy watches him use a thumb to smooth his threading out on Sapnap's flame, more nudging his kindling into place than actually using any force. Skeppy remembers the first time he'd seen that flame; when he and Bad were discussing children and Bad had shown him how the process would work. Sapnap's flame had been born from Bad's and he'd formed from that flame burning Skeppy's diamond. It had been a long, sometimes painful process. Skeppy's diamond didn't come off easy, and the temperatures needed to actually consume what he'd collected over months and months was no easy task for any flame, even the one that fueled a demon as powerful as Bad.

They'd done it, though, and Skeppy remembers the way that his diamond had *shone*, the way it had glowed so bright as it burnt up that he'd seen white spots in his vision for days after.

From that bright light, Sapnap's flame had been born. For months after that, they'd kept it safely encased in Skeppy's diamonds until, one day, the diamond had been absorbed and a little boy took its place. *Their* little boy, who they had to give up way too quick for Skeppy's taste. They'd gained two more children in the process and Skeppy hadn't even needed to shed his armor for them, but he'd still had to give up so *many* years of keeping Sapnap close and safe.

Sapnap had had to do so much on his own.

Skeppy sniffles, just once, and then forces the ache of tears back. "Your flame is okay, right? I didn't think, when we were riding. I made you go through the rain."

"Please," Bad scoffs and Skeppy sees the way he forces the smile, "I'm a-okay, Slep! A little rain won't put me out. My flame is fine and so am I."

"Fine enough to revive our idiot son?"

"Fine enough to revive our idiot son and remind my idiot husband to apologize to our *other* idiot sons."

Skeppy winces, fingers pausing in Sapnap's bangs. He can feel the way heat is beginning to trickle back into Sapnap's skin, the way his face starts to smooth out with every millimeter of soul-fire. Bad wraps around his inner flame.

"You don't need to remind me." He admits. "I know. I was angry."

"You were worried." Bad leans forward and carefully bonks their foreheads together. It had taken Skeppy a long, long time to get used to that instinct - Pandas had nearly concussed him when he was a toddler until Skeppy finally perfected hardening just his forehead. Now, it's a comfort. He leans forward, too, and lets Bad support both him and Sapnap for just a second.

"I'm still worried." He admits and lets the fear coat his words.

"Trust me." Bad goes back to work, winding ash-gray around Sapnap's flame methodically, unhurried but also unstoppable. "I brought him into this world and I'll make darn sure I keep him in it."

For whatever reason, this is the statement that finally eases Skeppy's heart. They got to him in time. He and Bad are here now, and that means that the people that love Sapnap most in the world are all finally under one roof.

Sapnap will be okay.

-

Karl thinks that he has Jimmy to blame for his ability to compartmentalize. His guild leader had sprung random missions and complications on them so often when they'd first started accepting jobs that Karl had just gotten real good at keeping the smile on and the energy up when no one else could. He'd held Chandler's hand the first time Chris had stitched him up, his first potion had been a hastily brewed lava resistance to rescue Jimmy from peril and he'd had to lob it over a pool of bubbling magma and just hope Jimmy could catch it. He'd been chased out of towns, been hunted, broken hearts, lied, stolen, and cheated - all with the same smile in place and the knowledge that whatever was going on could be processed later. And Karl was *good* at processing. Of everyone in

this damn house, he's probably the best at processing!

His hand shakes when he lifts his coffee, the liquid sloshing over. It burns his hand but he barely feels it. He sips. When he sets the mug down, it thumps. None of the others have touched their mugs since he served them. He managed to get George into some pants and an undershirt, at least.

He's really, really trying, but he's having a hard time keeping the calm in place. Maybe it's that there had been a brief period there where he'd fully expected that he'd have to take Quackity out of a room Sapnap was in for Quackity's safety, or maybe it was that he'd been watching Sapnap pull away and he'd fallen into the same habit of sitting back and just watching to see how the chips fell before he restacked them in his favor. Maybe it's that he'd just watched Bad pull a *whole fucking flame* out of Sapnap's chest and it was apparently supposed to be his soul except it had been nothing but ashy gray coal.

Maybe he's just losing his touch. All he's thought about for three days was the fear in Quackity's eyes and soup and how *cold* Sapnap had been, both emotionally and physically. How they'd both flinched away from him.

They all sit in silence. Karl drinks his coffee and then drinks Dream's, because he knows Dream doesn't drink coffee but they'd run out of tea the day before. He doesn't actually see George touch his drink but it's gone when he finishes Dream's and moves on. He doesn't touch Quackity's because, though it's still full and rapidly cooling, he can't bring himself to take it from him if he changes his mind.

"This is a shit happy ending." Quackity says, suddenly breaking the silence in the kitchen.

"Huh?" George flinches, shakes his head, "What?"

"I said," Quackity repeats and finally takes a hold of his mug. He doesn't lift it, just lets his hands rest on it. "This is a shit happy ending."

"It's not an ending." Karl swallows when Quackity looks at him. He hates when Quackity's eyes look like that - like he barely knows where he is or who he's with. "It's not a happy ending and it's not a sad one. It's not an ending. You don't get an ending if you're still alive."

"We deserve one." George reaches out without looking and Dream finds his hand on the table without hesitation. "A happy ending."

"No." Karl rotates his empty mug in his hands, gazing over the glaze pattern. "I don't want a happy ending right now. I want the next chapter."

"This is a shit chapter, then." Quackity pushes his mug toward Karl and puts his hands back under the table.

"Yeah." Karl admits. "This one fucking sucks."

Dream doesn't say a word but Karl doesn't expect him to. They go back to the silence. Karl drinks Quackity's coffee. The sun fully sets and night settles in. The moon rises. None of them move. Karl blinks at one point and the light changes. He does it again and the light changes again. Around the fifth blink, sunlight peeks back in and Quackity is leaning on him, snoring softly. Karl thinks he might be catnapping so he doesn't move. If he could somehow hold Quackity closer, he would, but Quackity has rejected every touch offered for days.

George and Dream both rest, too; George with his head in his arms on the table, Dream's face tilted downward and his eyes closed. There's a fifth person in the kitchen, gleaming in the sunlight.

“Skeppy.” He says quietly.

“Karl.” Skeppy nods at him from the stove. He’s stirring the roiling broth Karl has been sweating over for days. Karl bets he’s added something or other while they were out. It’s a relief that he hadn’t just dumped the whole thing; that means that *some* part of it was helpful, at least.

“You’re out here?”

“Bad’s resting.” Skeppy turns back to the pot. “He’s done all he can do for now. He’ll start more intensive measures when he wakes up but they both needed rest. It’s delicate work.”

“I’ve got some restoration potions brewed.” Karl offers, “Bad can have them.”

“Dunno if those will replenish flames, but we can try.” Skeppy nods thoughtfully. “If not, they’ll at least give him some pep in his step.”

“You can look at my stores, too,” Karl offers, fingers twitching desperately for something to do. Quackity’s hands are right there. Four days ago, Karl wouldn’t have hesitated to take them to hold – but Quackity doesn’t want to be touched right now. Karl understands and he won’t do it but, gods, does he really want to hold hands right now. “There’s so much random junk in there. Maybe something will be helpful.”

“Maybe.” Skeppy allows, and it feels like some sort of victory. “We’ll take a look when you’re free. Bad will need a lot of rest.”

“Sleep is important.” Karl says dumbly.

Skeppy, this time, just hums in response and stirs the soup. Karl holds his own hand for a few seconds and then carefully shifts Quackity to the table and stands up to help. Maybe moving will help him reorganize his head. There’s a small part of him that wishes he hadn’t let these four people destroy all that hard-earned trauma response but then he thinks of kissing Quackity, holding Sapnap’s warm hand, hearing George and Dream laugh from the other room, and he can’t regret it.

It’ll have to be enough, for now.

Sapnap remembers being *cold*. He knows he’s been sleeping for a long time because his body feels weak and fragile. There’s warmth, at least. After so long feeling like a block of ice, even the relatively small heat radiating from within him feels like he’s on pins and needles as it heats him up from the inside out.

There’s something hard and heated against his back, and familiar snoring at his side that forces his eyes open despite the drag to just go back to sleep. His dad is sleeping hunched over the bed, head in his long, spindly arms. And if his dad is here...

Sapnap blinks slowly, shifts so he can tilt his head against the hard planes of a chest he’d spent the first handful of years of his life sleeping against. The diamond gleams blue and bright. His father has fully encased himself in his armor and if Sapnap had to guess, he’d say that the temperature Sapnap is sleeping against would have otherwise burnt him. The room is so hot that the air shimmers. Sapnap sighs, grateful and comfortable and safe, and closes his eyes again.

“Awake, cub?”

Skeppy’s voice is familiar, feels like a verbal pat on the head.

Sapnap hums in response, too tired to try speaking.

“Bad,” Skeppy raises his voice a few notches, just enough that it isn’t a whisper. Bad, usually a heavy sleeper, jolts up immediately, which has Sapnap opening his eyes again.

“What?” he looks between them wildly, scrubbing a hand across his face. Though Bad exists mostly as a dark entity, Sapnap is more than used to reading him. Bad looks exhausted, almost as tired as Sapnap feels. “Is he okay? Is he going cold?”

“He’s awake,” Skeppy says and the quiet happiness makes Sapnap’s heart swell. He ducks his head against Skeppy’s chest, breathing deeply and appreciating the complete security of being wedged between his parents.

“Pandas.” Bad blinks rapidly, big red eyes watering. “Good morning.”

“It’s the middle of the afternoon.” Skeppy hand pats Sapnap’s head, fingers too blocky to run through his hair, and it’s such a familiar action that Sapnap almost wants to cry. It reminds him of when he was young and still in the Badlands, when he just *expected* that he would fall asleep between them and wake up with Skeppy’s hand on his head, petting him awake. Later, when he was in the barracks, especially during the first year, he’d lay awake for hours while Dream snored away next to him and miss the comfort of it.

“Whatever.” Bad sits up straight, shoulders slumping in relief, “I’m so glad you’re awake, Sap. Can you sit up? How do you feel?”

“No, he can’t. He feels weak and tired and he’s staying right here.” Skeppy announces, holding Sapnap tighter. Sapnap doesn’t fight it. He doesn’t want to sit up or talk. He lets his eyes drift closed again.

“I really need to check out his flame, Skep.” Bad says but Sapnap is already drifting off again while they bicker.

When he next wakes up, he feels - fucking lucid. *Awake* after what he’s sure must have been *months* of sleep. He isn’t in pain anymore, though he can feel that his flame is small, flickering and barely producing enough heat to bring him up to a safe body temperature, let alone power him as usual. His limbs are heavy, he doesn’t want to *move*, and his energy is low, but Sapnap is awake.

“Skeppy?” He slowly lifts himself up on his arms, finds Skeppy at his back and Bad sleeping on the bed next to them, stretched out with his feet hanging over the end of the mattress.

“‘m awake!” Skeppy says, sitting up with his eyes still closed, “What? Do you need something? Are you hurting?”

“I’m okay.” Sapnap smiles, watching as Skeppy blinks rapidly to wake up.

“You sound better.” Skeppy helps him sit up and all their shuffling rouses Bad, who quickly joins them as soon as he recognizes that Sapnap’s eyes are open.

“I feel better.” Sapnap admits, “Like...like I can breathe.”

“That’s good.” Bad’s voice breaks and he has to clear his throat, “Your flame is back. Can I look?”

Sapnap nods and watches, eyes wide, as Bad reaches forward.

It feels - well. Not good, really. Sapnap is still too weak to bring his flame forward himself and

Bad has to coax it. Bad's flame, the mother of Sapnap's own, is a call that Sapnap finds easy to follow, but it still feels a little bit as if he's being yanked around. Bad's touch is gentle, though, and Sapnap grips Skeppy's diamond hands as he sees his flame for himself. He'd been too scared to really view it on his own when he knew it was weak, as if a stray wind might take out the last of it. Now, he sees it and could weep. It's so small, a flicker of a candle in Bad's hands. A stronger flame would simply consume it. Sapnap's flame has been an inferno since he recovered from that winter years ago; he sometimes felt as if his fire was dangerous, would have simply consumed the world if it were somehow released. This flame would not even adequately light a closet.

"Oh." he says, voice small.

"Oh." Skeppy repeats. "You...you could have died, cub."

"I..." Sapnap blinks rapidly, eyes stinging, "Sorry."

"Let's not discuss it right now." Bad says quietly, one hand disappearing into his own chest to pull his inner flame out. A concentrated ball of fire so hot it's tinged blue and green, Sapnap has the overwhelming urge to swallow it himself, let it warm him properly. It's the part of Bad's flame that *made* Sapnap calling out to its mother embers and it's easy to ignore, but it's not a feeling Sapnap has experienced since he was barely old enough to understand his existence, barring those brief moments when he'd been sick as a child.

He watches Bad slowly feed his inner flame, the blue fading into more familiar oranges and cherry reds as it leaks little embers to Sapnap's. The candle flicker flares softly each time and, though it doesn't grow bigger, Sapnap feels it growing stronger in minuscule amounts.

He wants to give his thanks, but he knows better than to try. Skeppy might actually bash him until he's unconscious again. Instead, he watches his flame quietly.

"Being here," Skeppy murmurs into Sapnap's hair, "Brings back memories, yeah?"

Sapnap hums, taking advantage of the rare chance to just sit with his parents for a while.

"Do you remember the last time we were here?" Skeppy asks, "Just before we traveled to Kinoko."

"A little," Sapnap replies, and Skeppy chuckles.

"You *were* little. I remember, we were sat right here," Skeppy says, "We hadn't told you we were going to Kinoko yet. You were so small, cub. Still so young."

"The night before we left." Bad says, his flame jumping and dancing as he remembers, Sapnap's trying desperately to mirror it with the bare flickers it can manage, "You crawled into our bed and said you had a nightmare. And you asked for a story, so you could go back to sleep."

"I don't remember that," Sapnap frowns.

"You were very small. We didn't even finish the story. You were asleep before the end."

Sapnap still feels very small, tucked between both of his parents. But it's a nice kind of small, the kind when he feels secure, safe, knowing that the people around him will always protect him, no matter what.

"Would you," He starts, falters as the request twists his way up his throat, throttling itself. Despite this, Bad smiles.

"I don't remember shit -" Skeppy declares.

"*Language!*"

" - so why don't you remind us, Bad?"

Bad hums, the vibrations rumbling through from his flame to Sapnap's, gentle flickerings of merriment.

"Let me see... Yeah, I got it. Alright. You ready?"

Sapnap nods. Skeppy's arms are around him, solid and warm.

"Once, there was a witch who lived in a cottage in the woods," Bad starts, calling back to evenings spent sitting around and occasionally in a fire, feeling safe, feeling home. As he talks, he webs strands of fire around Sapnap's flame in loose lines, barely-there strands that feed into his. "She was powerful, and could magic up food, water, beautiful clothes, whatever she wanted, with a snap of her fingers. But what her magic couldn't fix was how people feared her. Many would come to her door, seeking cures, seeking answers to their problems. But for all her kindness, not one would repay her in kind. Some would stay for a few days, but it seemed to her that their betrayal was inevitable. Lonely she was, and lonely she stayed."

"One day, she could bear it no longer. She wove a spell, more powerful and more unpredictable than any she had woven before. She wished for companionship, she wished to love, but more importantly, she wished to be loved. When the spell was done, a golden apple lay on her table. She took a hesitant bite, and for a moment, thought her spell hadn't worked. Then she heard a knock at the door."

"This is my favorite part," Skeppy whispers, conspiratorially.

"I thought you didn't remember this story. Don't interrupt." Bad admonishes, but there can be no mistaking the fondness in his voice. "At the door was a tall and handsome man. He looked at her with utter adoration, took her hand and promised her his complete love and devotion. And for a time, they were happy. But the woman began to worry. Fear let itself into her home, and her fear of the past began to ruin her future. For she feared that her companion would one day leave, would betray her, just like all the others. No matter how much he reassured her, no matter his promises, she eventually could no longer trust his word alone. Every time she worried, she took another bite of the apple. Soon, there was only half left. Sooner still, barely a quarter. Eventually, there remained only a mouthful, and the seeds that she had so carefully gathered.'

"Trust me," her beloved begged, "I will stay. Til the mountains crumble and the stars fall, I will love you and stay with you and care for you with all my heart. But you cannot have love without trust, and you must trust that I will not leave you."

The woman loved her companion, but she did not trust him. And so, she took the final bite. In the morning, her lover was gone, never to be seen again. With him, her magic, for she had poured it all into that last, most powerful spell.

In a vain hope, she planted the seeds, all that remained of the apple that had given her happiness, if only for a brief while. Over time, much shorter than she expected, an apple tree grew. It always seemed to produce fruit, and each was unnaturally red, and unnaturally delicious. In time, those who came to her doors before for cures, for spells, came instead for her apples, for her baked apple pies, for the sweetest cider anyone had ever known. They no longer feared her, and so, she had companionship. She was loved. But despite the lesson she had learned, despite her beloved's

words, she did not, would not, trust, and so, never loved another again.”

Silence spread around the room; either still caught in the storytelling, or unwilling to break the silence.

“Never again?” Sapnap asks, finally.

“You can love, without trust,” Bad says, careful, “Whether that trust was never there in the first place, or... or was broken, love can still exist. But it’s a wound, Sap. And a wound can fester. It’ll poison everything else, turning that love sour. You can love without trust. But it doesn’t last.” Bad reaches out, touches Skeppy’s hand. “It can’t.”

There’s a lump in Sapnap’s throat that he can’t seem to get rid of. He isn’t quite sure what to say; what he *can* say.

“It’s not just... trusting other people, either.” Skeppy says, seemingly aware of Sapnap’s internal strife, “It’s trusting that the world won’t end while you’re sleeping. It’s trusting that the dawn will come, even though it seems like the night will last forever.”

“How?” Sapnap says, “How can you believe that?”

“Your dad,” Skeppy says, simply. “There was a time...long before you were born, and I’m not as good as stories, but, I got...trapped, once. And it was dark and cold and it felt like nothing could ever get me out. And when Bad came and saved me, I thought it was all over. It wasn’t. Every day still felt like I was back there, stuck in the dark. I couldn’t see any light, I couldn’t see hope, even though what had trapped me was dead and gone.”

“You never told me about that. How did you get out?”

“I never wanted you to relate enough to need to know about it. I just...I had to trust.” Skeppy says, “I had to trust that your dad, that Bad wanted me to be happy. With or without him, I had to trust that the world hadn’t ended while I holed myself away. We built that trust together, brick by brick, moment by moment. It wasn’t always happy, but it wasn’t always sad either. Eventually, there was more happy than sad. The sad bits were still there, even though they were outweighed by the happy parts. Like in the story. She was happy, in the end, she had friends and was loved. But she was always a little bit sad.”

“I tried,” Sapnap says, “I told the others a Badlands story, before. They thought it was too sad.”

“Sometimes things have to be sad for a lesson to be learned,” Bad says, “Happy endings are good; wonderful, even.” He inclines his head, smiles at Skeppy, “But they aren’t everything. You can’t have the good without the bad; you can’t be happy without being sad sometimes. Like when we took you to Kinoko.”

Skeppy nods in agreement as Bad continues.

“You were - *are* - our happy ending, Pandas. But the thing is, kiddo...”

“Nothing ever really ends.” Skeppy finishes, “Not like in the stories. We found each other, and then we had you. And for a little bit, it was perfect. Even when you brained me trying to bump our heads together or you burnt a hole right through your highchair. It was perfect. It was ours.”

“But it wasn’t an ending.” Bad says. “The story just goes on and on. Forever. Always changing, always starting again. The wheel turns, and happiness fades and rises again like the sun. Deciding to take you with us to Kinoko was the hardest choice we ever made, Pandas.”

“We both knew it was the right thing - we thought that, at the time. We didn’t know about the fucking throne, of course, but...we thought...” Skeppy adds, voice hitching over the words, “We thought that it would be good for you in the long run. But you laid here and you were...” He sighs, “You were so small. Too small to be given the responsibility that was about to come. Bad said -”

“I wish you could stay this way forever.” Bad finishes, quietly. “But I don’t wish that now. Do you know why?”

Sapnap shakes his head.

“Because then we wouldn’t have got to see you grow up.” Bad says. “You wouldn’t have got a chance to tell your story; be the person we knew you could be. We wouldn’t have got to see how incredible you are, how incredible you will be.”

Beside him, Skeppy nods, arms tightening around him. Somehow, he instinctively knows that Sapnap’s eyes are beginning to burn, that tears are welling up in his throat.

“We’re so proud of you, Sap,” Bad says as he starts to disconnect their flames, the strands of fire falling away one after the other until Sapnap doesn’t feel the heat anymore. “So, so proud.”

“But I...” Sapnap starts but Skeppy cuts him off.

“Whatever you’re about to say,” Skeppy says, “it won’t change how proud we are of you. We’re your parents. We could never be disappointed in you.”

Bad carefully presses Sapnap’s flame back into his chest and Sapnap curls over it, arms crossing as if he can hold it close, keep it safe.

“I failed,” Sapnap says, voice cracking. “I lost Dream. I couldn’t even get George out of the country, we were dragged back to the kingdom in *chains*, they nearly executed both of us! And then, when we’re *safe*, and I’m supposed to be *happy*, I can’t stop thinking about how they’re going to *kill* me! And in the end, I couldn’t do the most basic fire demon thing. I couldn’t even keep my *flame* alight. How -” His voice drops, perhaps his most terrifying admission, even as safe as he feels in his father’s arms, “How are you not disappointed in me?”

“Only disappointed in ourselves,” Bad says softly, “For failing to keep you safe. Fire demons get sick when their flames do what yours did, you know that. The dark thoughts, they’re just your instincts reacting to the trauma. It isn’t because you failed. You just needed help, cub.”

“No matter how old you are,” Skeppy says, “You’ll always be *our* son. Our little boy. And there’s times where we should take a step back, let you live your own life. But we should have been there. Shouldn’t have let you carry all of this on your own. Should have supported you better, politics be damned.”

“They needed you,” Sapnap protests, weakly.

“You needed us,” Bad says, taking Sapnap’s hand in his own, “That will always be more important.”

“I don’t know how to fix this,” Sapnap admits, quietly, “I want to be better, I want to trust them but I don’t know *how*.” He looks at Skeppy, pleadingly, “How did you do it? Please, Skeppy, *Dad*, I -”

“It’s hard,” Skeppy says, “But you have to choose to trust the people you love. Make a conscious choice to trust them, to trust that they’ll stay, that they love you. Knowing that... knowing that they might still hurt you. They’re people, too, and any one of you could fuck up at any point.”

It's a mark of how seriously Bad is listening to Skeppy that he doesn't offer a token protest. Instead, he just nods.

"They could hurt you. Or you can hurt them. But trusting isn't about never hurting again. That's impossible. To trust them is to know that no matter how much hurt there is, they'll still be there for you. As you will be for them."

"I said..." Sapnap says, quietly, "I told Q and Karl that they were the worst things that had ever happened to me. I was so angry, and so cold and so fucking scared, and I... I think at the time I meant it. It wasn't true, it *isn't* true, but I meant it. Isn't that worse?"

"They're still here," Bad says gently, "They kept you warm and fed and as safe as they could until we got here. They've spent the last few days doing the same for us, because we were helping you. They've chopped wood and carried water and George spent at least three days keeping you warm with his own body heat. But they haven't come in. Do you know why?"

Sapnap shakes his head.

"Because we asked them not to." Bad says, "We said you needed time, and they gave it to you. They didn't do this because they expect you to owe them something. They do it because they love you, and they want you to be happy. Even if that's without them. Does that make sense?"

Sapnap nods. He can't bring himself to talk. He knows that if he tries, he'll just start crying.

"And..." Skeppy starts out, hesitant, and that's odd enough that it really catches Sapnap's attention, makes him listen. "If...if being away from them, for a while, will help...then you can come with us. Not back to Kinoko, necessarily, but we can go to Pandora. Or we could visit Snowchester for a while."

"You think I should leave!?" Sapnap turns to stare at him, horrified. As expected, the words forced out make the tears follow.

"I don't *think* anything." Skeppy wipes his eyes gently, diamond armor falling away so his skin is soft on Sapnap's cheek, "But if you think you need some space, more space than just a locked door...we can do that. It's okay to need space, Sap. Only the gods know how often I sent Bad on some diplomatic mission or another when we needed some time. It isn't running away to take time for yourself to heal."

"But..." Sapnap bites his lip. But what? He's...once, he could have said that they needed him. But that isn't true anymore, is it? Dream has been found and returned to them. Schlatt is dead. George isn't being hunted. They have a home, a safe place, each other. All Sapnap has done for the last few months is cause strife and hurt; he's been moody and aggressive. He *scared* Quackity. He made them all cry and put them out for days just trying to keep him alive because he hadn't thought to call his dad for help. Would it be so awful if he just...went away?

"Stop," Bad says, firm.

"You don't even know what I'm thinking," Sapnap says, wiping his eyes with the back of his hand, and his parents have the good grace to pretend they don't notice.

"I know that self-blaming look when I see it," Bad says, "You got it from me, kiddo." He sighs, "Just because they don't need you like they did before, it doesn't mean that they don't love you. They might not need you, but they *want* you. If they have to wait for you, if you need time, they'll wait. This is about you, Pandas, and they would agree."

"There's no reason to decide now." Skeppy ruffles his hair. "Think about it. Talk with yourself. Figure out what you think would be best for *you*, cub. And let us know."

"...okay." Sapnap nods, just once, and then has to close his eyes. His head spins with the possibilities and the *feelings*. The guilt and the small parts that are warming to the idea of going away and the anger and fear and resentment still rumbling in him.

He's so tired.

"Can I go back to sleep?" He asks, small.

"Yeah, Pandas." Bad and Skeppy both gentle him flat. "Get some rest. We'll get some food in you next time you wake up and I'll continue to feed your flame until it can self-sustain."

Sapnap nods and hides his face in the pillow. It's easy to fall asleep again, but his unease does not abate.

Quackity knows how to be lonely. He'd spent the majority of his life alone. There had been Schlatt, and Wilbur's family, and then Karl and Sapnap, but all of those had happened in only the last handful of years in his life. Before that, he'd been responsible for his own entertainment, his own validation, his own meals, his own emotional state. With Schlatt, all of that had still been true, but he'd had to add on *Schlatt's* shit, too; he'd still been in charge of himself. With Wilbur's family, it had been easy. They were nice, and he liked them, and he knew that Wilbur was interested in him and Techno didn't outright *hate* him, so it hadn't been trouble at all to forge false connections, build faux friendships. Karl and Sapnap...well. They're them, and Quackity - Quackity loves them. Sometimes, Quackity loves them so much that it scares him. But love doesn't erase the past, and Quackity has been lonely for far, far longer than he's been loved and he knows how to *be* in loneliness much better than he knows how to be in love.

That's what he tells himself, at least.

Over the last week, he's wandered this big house, avoiding the other people within. He's visited every room, he's roamed the two gardens and the small groves that surround the property, and the orchard. When his heart yearns for warm hands, he viciously reminds himself that those hands won't be warm right now and that it's his fault. When he finds his feet following the paths that take him toward the brewing room or the kitchen, he forces himself to take a random turn. The kindness he knows that he'd find in either of those rooms feels like it might just break him.

Instead, he just...tries to be useful, when he isn't wandering. He chops wood when he can convince Dream to get some sleep instead of working himself past exhaustion. He does dishes late into the night while Karl rests between constantly adding in new ingredients to his stock that Skeppy gets flown in every day. He does laundry and goes to fetch the weekly groceries with Patches on his own while George runs whatever errands Skeppy and Bad send him on until he's practically dead on his feet moving firewood and taking dishes back and forth and bringing blankets to be laundered. He avoids Skeppy's eyes when he comes out of Dream's room every so often and he makes himself scarce so he isn't in the way. He knows Sapnap woke up days ago but has refused to see any of them and the thought of accidentally breaking that command sends him into a panic.

Night is the only time he allows himself to return to their bedroom. His nightmares have been particularly awful lately; he dreams of the Nether, of Dream being pulling back in despite their effort, of Karl being beaten to death right in front of him, of being strangled while they cried his name, of George being executed in the forest, of Schlatt's *face* and his hands on Quackity. He dreams of his wings, constantly; of flying, and then feeling a heavy weight on his back that brings

him crashing to the ground, of Schlatt's drunken berating as shears bite into muscle and bone and skin and feather and tendon and vein and -

He dreams of watching Schlatt do the same to Sapnap or Karl or George or Dream. He dreams of standing by while Schlatt takes control of Kinoko and he dreams of being dragged into the Nether himself, of living the rest of eternity damned in that hell for Schlatt's benefit. He dreams of it all, and the only thing that keeps him sane is waking up with Karl, so night is when he returns.

Every single night, Karl welcomes him with open arms and open covers. He doesn't touch Quackity and Quackity is thankful for it. The thought of being touched lately sends shivers of revulsion to the tips of his fingers and toes; at the same time, he wants nothing more than to be wrapped in their arms. He misses the kisses and the giggling and the way Sapnap would quietly ask permission before stroking his wings until Quackity fell asleep and he misses the way Karl would curl up against Quackity's chest and whisper sweet bedtime stories into the darkness until Sapnap's body stilled in slumber. He misses being able to tangle his fingers in Karl's hair and massage his scalp until he was practically a boneless blob of deep breathing.

He *misses* them. He misses them. He misses them.

This day is long. He walks in on Dream and George together in a sitting room, holding hands with Dream bent double and his face pressed to George's lap while George whispers to him, the both of them looking tired and stressed. He finds Skeppy in the kitchen on accident and Skeppy breezes past him without a glance, arms full of fresh blankets.

Quackity is holding on by a thread by the time darkness falls and he allows himself to go where his heart aches for him to be.

Karl holds up the sheets and Quackity slips under, blinks back tears at the fact that his spot is warm. Karl's been laying in it, waiting for him, keeping his place.

"I love you, baby." Karl whispers and it isn't a sweet bedtime story but *fuck* if Quackity clings to it so tightly it's almost pathetic. He's lost Sapnap, maybe forever, but Karl still loves him. Still wants him. Quackity wishes he were easier to love; he wishes that he could touch Karl right now, wishes he could speak past the lump in his throat. He wants so badly to say *I love you*. Instead, he pulls the blanket up to his chin and stares at the darkness where he knows Karl to be until sleep takes him.

He dreams of the kitchen, except this time he *is* writing a message to Schlatt instead of the simple poetry book he'd actually been working on. He's detailing their every routine instead of how swiftly Sapnap handles his knife, letting Schlatt know when the perfect time to strike is instead of how nice the evening seems through the kitchen window. He dreams of Sapnap calling him out, of Karl defending him, of Sapnap snatching the book and revealing his treachery. He dreams of being pinned to the floor and a paring knife being taken to what remains of his useless wings and knowing he deserves it.

He wakes up with salty cheeks and teary eyes, Karl's worried face in his view, dull light peeking through their window.

"Morning." Karl carefully sets a hand between them, leaves it open. Quackity slowly, slowly slides a hand closer so that there are barely centimeters between their pinkies. Though their skin doesn't touch, he feels Karl's warmth. Guilt eats at his insides. Disgust and shame, anger, disappointment. Most of all, what settles like a stone in him is the knowledge that part of him wishes that what he had with Karl and Sapnap was just a little more like what he had with Schlatt so Sapnap could have just punished him and then they'd have moved on, gone back to normal. He knows that's *wrong*, that Sapnap would *never*, but sometimes Quackity remembers how easy it was with Schlatt once he

had the pattern down and how much *harder* it is when there's more than obedience and blind devotion involved. He wishes that all it would take is a pound of flesh to have Sapnap back with them. He tries not to acknowledge that he'd give it gladly.

"Good morning." he says instead of any of that, voice scratchy. "Did I wake you?"

"No." Karl smiles oddly, blinking his wet eyes rapidly. "I had to get up to go add more blaze powder to the stock."

"Oh." Quackity closes his eyes again. "I had a bad dream."

"I know." Karl sniffs just once, and then pitches his voice higher. "I had a nice one. Wanna hear about it?"

Quackity nods. He lets his pinky twitch, brush against Karl's. It's not so bad.

"Do you remember the rock we climbed, before we got rained into the cave?" Karl asks and Quackity nods again, breathing in deep and then exhaling slow.

"I dreamed we were back there. You and I climbed up and we were looking out over the mountain. I could see the storm coming from so far away but I couldn't focus on it because you were there and my eyes just kept going back to you. You looked far away."

"I was thinking about flying." Quackity recalls softly. "About how I could have glided off once."

"I was thinking about how beautiful you were." Karl admits and it makes Quackity smile.

"You say that about how I look all the time."

"Well, if the shoe fits..."

"Karl. Your dream."

"Huh?" Karl blinks, "Oh, yeah, my dream. Anyway, we were on the rock and I just couldn't keep my eyes off you, Q. It felt like every time I blinked, you were farther away. So I started to get closer, but you would get away every time I blinked so I just decided that I'd never blink again."

"Your eyes wouldn't work anymore if you did that, stupid."

"Then I'd go blind." Karl says firmly. "Whatever. I've seen enough sunrises in my life. I've seen you and Sap. I don't need to see anything else. I'll just go blind."

"Is that what you dreamed about? Going blind?"

"No." Karl smiles. "I dreamed that I called your name and you turned to look at me, too, and saw how far apart we were so you came back to me. You said I looked lonely. You said I looked like I needed your help."

Quackity hums to show he's listening. Watching Karl, taking in the bruises under his eyes even fresh from sleep, the sadness in the lines of his smile, Quackity has to agree with the him from Karl's dream. Karl does look lonely.

"You reached out and took my hand." Karl goes on, sighing softly, eyes fluttering, "I remember exactly how it felt. I'd know your hand from any other in the entire world."

"You're a romantic."

“Always.” Karl says with a quirked smile. “But it’s the truth. I bet if we held hands right now, it would feel just like my dream. I know that I recreated it perfectly.”

“I believe you.” Quackity finds himself smiling, too. He finds himself wanting to hold Karl’s hand. He creeps his fingers closer, lets them lay inert across Karl’s. Karl doesn’t curl his fingers, doesn’t even twitch his hand. He just lets Quackity touch.

“We held hands and watched the storm coming.” Karl turns his face into his pillow, yawns, “And then I heard Sapnap calling our names so I looked away from the storm and down at the ground. Sapnap was waiting for us.”

“I remember.”

“Yeah.” Karl snorts, “The worrywart. He told us we were going to fall off and break our heads open and to get down before he came up after us. I didn’t want him to have a heart attack so we climbed down, like what really happened. I remember feeling how warm his hands really were even through my clothes, and how close he held me. He kissed me and then he helped you down and kissed you, too.”

“...what happened next?” Quackity can’t help but ask.

“I held his hand, too.” Karl says as Quackity slides their palms together, slow and careful. “And he held yours. Just the three of us, holding hands, as the storm rolled in. The rain fell, but it didn’t touch us. We just stood together.”

“Were you still lonely?” Quackity sighs as Karl’s fingers finally curl in, hold his hand gently. He feels like he can breathe for the first time in days.

“No.” Karl smiles. “I have you two with me. How could I be lonely?”

Quackity takes a moment to let the words sink in and then, all at once, he’s crying.

“He won’t even *see us*.” He sobs into his pillow, holding Karl’s hand so tightly that he feels bones shifting. “He won’t e-even see us, Karl -”

“Shh,” Karl soothes him, opening his other arm up. Quackity crawls into his embrace, the ache so deep and terrible that it’s sickening, an illness welling up within him. Karl holds him gently, intimately and Quackity shrinks into his arms, hoping desperately that Karl can do the job of two and keep him from shattering in their bed.

“He’s sick, angel,” Karl peppers kisses on his head, voice lulling and loving, “He needs time. You needed time this week, too. But he’ll come back, just like you came back. And we’ll be here, just like this, waiting for him. He’s alive, Quackity. He’s recovering. He has things to work out, even if he’s pretended all this time that he hasn’t, but he loves us.”

“I wish he’d worked it out with us.” Quackity has to admit through his stuttering breathing, “I wish he’d told us before - told us that he was - just *told us* -”

“I do, too.” Karl rubs his thumb in circles at the base of Quackity’s spine and it’s so *much* after days and days of not being touched. Quackity wants to arch away and press closer. He wants to be touched all over, by two sets of hands. He wants to *feel* that they love him. He wants to run away and never, ever see either of them again. His heart is breaking and gluing itself back together and breaking and gluing itself back together over and over. Every word Karl says hurts and heals and hurts again.

“This is our fault.” Quackity chokes out.

“Maybe.” Karl nods carefully. “But we’re here to help fix it. That’s all we can do.”

Quackity can’t bring himself to put to words the thought that’s been chasing him for days now, physically can’t form the words ‘*what if he wants to leave*’ so he just swallows them back down.

“That was a nice dream.” he says, instead.

“It was.” Karl says. “I can’t wait to hold both your hands again. I’m going to prove to you that I know yours from anyone else in the whole world.”

“I believe you.” Quackity laughs through the tears and the laughter quickly shifts into sobbing that he muffles into Karl’s shoulder.

As the sun rises, Quackity holds tight to the only person he has left and desperately, *desperately* wishes that Karl is telling the truth.

“Well...” Bad sits back, his palm resting warm and familiar on Sapnap’s bare chest, “I think that’s about all I can do, Pandas. Your flame is going to be much stronger than mine when it’s finished maturing and I’m afraid my frail little embers can’t sustain that inferno much more.”

“Stop being dramatic.” Skeppy pats Bad’s shoulder kindly, “You’ll always have the biggest *flame* in my book, babe.”

“*Skeppy -*”

“*Father!*”

“*What!?*” Skeppy sniffs, “You two are so dirty. You taught him that, Bad.”

“*Me!?*”

“Yes, you -”

“*Hello!?*” Sapnap snaps his fingers, “My flame?”

Bad grows serious once again, turning away from Skeppy, who rolls his eyes, “You’re still hurt, Sap. I’ll be real with you, it’s going to be...a long time before you’re fully recovered. At least a year, I think, and that’s only with doing all your exercises and meditating and making sure you’re eating the blaze soup every month. It’s a long road. But your inner flame is strong and so are you. You’ll be okay.”

Sapnap settles a hand over his own chest, feels his heart beating. Within his core, he feels his flame. It’s burning; not as hot as it once was, but no longer so frail that it can’t even regulate him. He feels *warm*. He feels comfortable. Carefully, he heats his hands up until the blankets start to sear where he touches them. He feels only a weak tug at his core, a sign that he will soon grow tired if he doesn’t cool off - but it’s a start.

“Your temperature control is going to be faulty. Almost like when you were a sparkling.” Bad catches his hands, unbothered by the heat. “You’ll have to be careful when you’re touching people, or when they’re touching you. Be mindful of the weather. No jaunts through the rain, not even a summer shower. No going outside when it’s snowing, especially for longer than ten minutes. Keep the house warm, when you can. Get plenty of rest. Eat well.”

“Bad.” Skeppy smacks Bad’s shoulder gently and Bad gets the message, quiets down so Skeppy can sit on the edge of the bed and take Sapnap’s hands from him. Sapnap tries to rapidly cool his skin before he burns his father but Skeppy seems to barely notice the high temperature even without his diamond mitts.

“I know you’re still recovering.” Skeppy says quietly, dropping his voice to something soft and caring, which immediately makes Sapnap nervous. Skeppy only sounds like that when he’s being deadly serious. “But have you thought about what we offered? About going away for a while?”

“I...” Sapnap trails off. The truth is that he has and he hasn’t. He’s thought about it abstractly; what would he do? Where would they go? The problem was that any time he picked a destination, his first thought was of what the others would think of it. If they went to Snowchester, he’d want to take Quackity to see the ocean. If they went to the Greater SMP, he’d want to take Karl to the museum. If they went to Pandora, he’d finally get to show George and Dream around where he grew up; his head would fill with plans, only for them to all come crashing down when he remembered that the plan would be to *leave them here*. There would be no point in leaving if he just took the sources of his stress with him.

“No rush.” Skeppy reminds him. “Take your time. We’re going to stay here for a while yet, make sure to get this place stocked up on what the blaze soup will need, get it in order, you know.”

“The boys have been doing a good job of keeping it standing.” Bad smiles. “I’ve never seen someone do laundry as vigorously as Quackity.”

“He’s a hard worker.” Sapnap finds himself smiling. There’s a faint itch in his chest that quickly spreads to his stomach. Quackity. Fuck.

He stops smiling.

“I...I hurt him.” He says softly. “Before I blacked out. I...I tried to hurt him. I *did* hurt him. I scared him.”

“You weren’t yourself.” Skeppy says fiercely, “Your flame was out, Sapnap. All you had was instincts and trauma. You can’t blame yourself for that.”

“Don’t make excuses for him, Scep.” Bad says gently. “What we do when our flames are weak...yes, we get sick. But we’re still responsible for it.”

Something passes between them, a silent conversation that came from the years and years that they’d shared together before Sapnap has even been a spark in Bad’s flame, before Skeppy deflates.

“They love you.” He grumbles. “They’ll forgive you if you apologize.”

“I need...” Sapnap bites his lip, “I think...I think I need to talk to them. All of them.”

“Don’t overwhelm yourself.” Bad ruffles his hair gently, “You’ve *just* received your last treatment, cub. Just get some rest.”

Sapnap knows Bad is right. He needs to get some more rest; *real* rest. Sleep has been coming easier and easier lately, and he’s starting to wake up feeling *well*, now. Like the sleep is actually doing its job. There are still nightmares, but he wakes up knowing that they aren’t real, and he doesn’t feel the constant, constant itch in the back of his mind telling him that he’s in danger anymore. He feels *good*.

He...he misses his friends. He knows Bad is right, but *fuck*, he misses his friends.

“Can I at least see Dream or George?” he tries. “They both run warm. You two can finally get some real rest, too.”

“We’ve been resting.” Skeppy protests immediately, but subsides with a grumble with Sapnap only gives him a flat look.

“I *suppose* Dream or George could take over for a few hours.” Bad says slowly and Sapnap tries not to show the excited grin that tries to take over his face. “Oh, don’t look like that! We haven’t been keeping you hostage in here!”

“You said no visitors!”

“*You* said it first!”

“Okay, well, I’m saying I want them now!”

“Fine! Fine, for fuck’s sake, you brat!”

“*Language*, Skeppy!”

“*Language, Skeppy*,” Skeppy mocks as he stands up and heads to the door, “But if they start to get you worked up, I’m going to sense it with my parent powers and kick them out, Sapnap, I mean it.”

“Promise.” Sapnap crosses his fingers under the blankets. Somehow, he thinks Bad senses it but he doesn’t call Sapnap out on it.

No sooner has Skeppy opened the door and said “Children, come hither!” do both Dream and George nearly skid into the frame. It’s the first glimpse of them that Sapnap has had in nearly a week and just the sight of them fills Sapnap with the sort of bubbly relief that one might associate with a storm breaking after days of being trapped in a cave or hearing the jingle of keys once locked in a hole in the ground.

“Dream! George!” He shouts before he can help himself and Skeppy barely manages to duck as both of his brothers sprint past him and into the room. George dives straight for him and Sapnap opens his arms, catches George’s slightly taller frame just before Dream crashes on top of them both, flattening the three of them to the bed in a pile of long limbs and blankets.

“*Careful!*” Skeppy says severely but none of them listen. All Sapnap can bring himself to do is cling desperately to the two of them and take deep breaths so he doesn’t just start crying.

It feels like it’s been years since he’s just held them, the sound of George snuffling into his shoulder, and Dream pressing himself close into their collective warmth like a cat near fire. He feels eight years old again, cuddling with his best friends after a long day of playing in the sun. He feels all of his twenty years, when he rubs a hand up Dream’s back and feels the puckered skin under his shirt, scars that Sapnap doesn’t remember.

“Hey,” Sapnap says, dizzy with the relief of having his best friends, his brothers, back in his arms again. He realizes with a slight shock that for this entire time, recovering in his room with his parents but without his family, he hadn’t spent a single second worrying about them. Not like he used to, anyway. A Sapnap of just a couple of weeks ago would have been breaking himself apart with paranoia, with fear for them the second they were out of sight. It has been a different kind of worry; the one where he wonders if they would think less of him, for breaking as he did. For the pain he’s put them through because he didn’t dare say anything. The weight of his parents’ offer

weighs heavy on his shoulders, but it doesn't snuff out his flame, or break his back.

He's been worried *about* them, not *for* them, and that realization makes him feel lighter than air. It's clearly been rough; there's bags under their eyes, exhaustion in their limbs, a worry that shouldn't be there in boys so young, but they're safe, they're smiling, and all of that is fixable. It can be mended. Sapnap finds himself wanting to mend it.

"Hey yourself," George says, "You idiot."

"Missed you, moron," Dream adds, with a shit-eating grin.

"Please don't get yourselves kicked out after they just let you in." Sapnap laughs, watery.

"And we will," Skeppy warns as he closes the door behind him and Bad, "If there's any kind of funny business."

"Yeah, yeah," George says dismissively, his full attention on Sapnap, "Are you okay? How's your flame?"

"Shouldn't I be asking you that question?" Sapnap asks. He shifts himself on the bed so they're all sitting upright; George's hand still on his legs, thumb digging in as if he's trying to remember how Sapnap feels; solid, warm, alive. Dream has tangled his fingers with Sapnap's, tapping out a rhythmic pattern with no discernible meaning. It's good. It grounds them both.

"I don't have a flame, stupid," George says.

"The other question. Are you guys alright?"

"Because we're the ones recovering from almost dying," Dream says it so plainly, so matter of fact, it makes Sapnap flinch. Dream's tapping stops, squeezing his hand tightly instead, before it resumes, steady and strong. Under their skin, Sapnap can feel their heartbeats, in tandem with his, "We're fine, Pandas. All of us are just fine. Worried about you, but we're okay. We're safe."

"I know," Sapnap says, and miracle of miracles, he believes them. Trusting his brothers had always been as easy as breathing, and his lungs are clear of ash for the first time in weeks. "Gods, guys, I'm so *sorry* -"

"You've got nothing to apologize for," George starts, as Dream looks utterly indignant, but Sapnap raises a hand and they fall silent.

"I do." Sapnap says, "I scared you guys, I know I did. I thought I could ignore it until it got better, I didn't want to worry you or scare you and I... I was afraid of you guys. What you might do because of it." He hastens to finish at the look on their faces, "It was the flame, and everything that we've been through, it all fed into each other until I was so wrapped up in it that I could barely think. Until I couldn't pretend it was alright any longer." He swallows, "Bad said...he told me what you guys were doing, before they arrived. You took care of me, even though I was stupid, and stubborn and bullheaded and scared all of you so much. So, I'm sorry. I'm sorry I put you through that."

"Pandas," Dream says, with complete seriousness, "If you weren't stupid and stubborn and bullheaded, you wouldn't be our Sapnap. We love you for it, not in spite of it."

He knocks their foreheads together, just briefly, because of all of them, Dream knows how much that Badland's greeting means to him.

"If something like this happens again, you have to tell us." He says, "We love you. We want to

help you.”

George socks him in the arm, and Sapnap jumps, even as George blinks up at him with watering eyes, “How many times do I have to tell you? You’re not a knight anymore. You’re not my bodyguard anymore. And even if you were, you don’t have to be strong for us. Not for us, Sapnap.”

“Just once more, Georgie,” Sapnap says, voice cracking, and George’s hands dig into his thighs with the force of his stare.

“You’re not my knight, Sapnap,” George says, “I’m *not* your prince. You’re my brother.”

“And brothers talk,” Dream says, firmly, “Tell us when you’re feeling like that.”

“You’re not just saying that because Skeppy keeps hissing ‘*communicate*’ from the corners of the mansion, are you?” George laughs, and Sapnap groans.

“It gave me the idea,” Dream admits, “But I *am* serious. We should talk more.”

“We didn’t really...” Sapnap starts, before biting his lip. It takes a moment of non-verbal encouragement before he continues, “I love you guys. This *wasn’t* your fault, not for a moment. But when we got here, we just... carried on. As if nothing had happened, when it *had* and none of us wanted to break first and say those first ugly words until I...did.”

“Okay,” George says, “Okay. We’re here. We’re listening.”

“It’ll hurt.” Sapnap says, miserably, and feels his flame ebb, just a little. It never fades though, not with the way that they squeeze his hands and they don’t leave, not for a moment.

“Not as much as losing you would have,” Dream replies, carefully. “I - We can’t lose you, Sapnap.”

Sapnap thinks about his parent’s suggestion and swallows past the lump in his throat.

“I know,” He starts, “I know you didn’t remember, George. I know that now. But I didn’t know that then, and it was like you were moving on without me. I wanted to take you by the shoulders and shake you until you finally admitted what we lost, scream at you until you broke and showed you were hurting just as much as me.”

“I...”

“But you weren’t.” Sapnap stares down at his hands. “Not in the same way I was. And I know it wasn’t your fault, but you should have told me *before* the coup, too. Both of you, you shouldn’t have sent me away, you should have let me *help*.” He hates that his voice is cracking, that tears are dripping down his cheeks.

For the first time in so long, his body is heating up, the gentle sizzling of saltwater meeting red hot skin, but neither of them are letting go of him.

“You didn’t remember and I was jealous. It hurt so *fucking* much, thinking you were gone, Dream.”

“I wasn’t gone,” Dream says, gently, and Sapnap bites back a shout, his voice only raising slightly in protest.

"But you *were*, Dream!" He snaps, "XD wasn't you, wasn't my brother, not in any of the ways that mattered. You hid, and you only cared about George and I understand why but it was still fucked."

Roughly, Sapnap takes his free hand and rubs at his eyes, just so he can't see the looks on their faces, "I wish you had just told me why you were sneaking off, George. I wish you had told me that you were XD, Dream. I wish Karl and Q had told me who they were working for when they decided they wanted to stay. I wish that you hadn't left me all alone. All of you thought you were protecting me by lying to me, but all it did was help extinguish my flame with every little thing. And when I was finally safe, I couldn't believe it. I couldn't believe *you*. I don't -" Sapnap pulls together the last of his composure, "I don't want to feel like that again. *Don't* lie to me again. Not like that."

Silence stretches on, interrupted only by the crackling of flames.

"I'm sorry," George breaks first, always the first, "Sapnap, I'm so sorry. I thought us talking in the carriage home...but it wasn't. I should have known."

"I don't blame you," Sapnap says. "I didn't... I didn't say that because it was your fault."

"It is. We wanted to protect you but it just backfired." Dream adds, quiet. "You're right. You're always right in the end, Pandas."

"Don't say that, it'll go to my head, dude," Sapnap's attempt at humor falls a little flat in the seriousness of the room. He presses his forehead to Dream's and a moment later he feels George's temple pressing into the side of his hair, "It's alright. I forgave you both ages ago. I just... needed to get it out. I needed you to know."

"Thank you." George says, "For telling us."

"Do you want us to leave?" Dream asks.

"Don't you fucking dare." Sapnap says, and wraps his arms around them, "Don't you dare step a foot outside this room for at least another hour."

"Done." George says, like it's the easiest thing in the world.

"I want you to know something." Dream says, carefully, after a long moment, when Sapnap's face has migrated to the crook of his shoulder and George is rubbing circles into his back, "About when I was XD."

"I already said I forgave you for that."

"No, I..." Dream swallows, "I could hear you. When you - with the offerings. It's how I found you. I followed you. *You*. Not George."

Sapnap is very glad his face is hidden. It means his small sobs are muffled, that he can soak Dream's shirt with no one knowing.

Oh. Oh.

"It wasn't just George that I escaped the Nether for, Sapnap." Dream says, speaking into Sapnap's hair, his breath rustling the strands, "I'm sorry if I - *that* I made you feel like that."

He nods. He doesn't know what to say, doesn't know that he *can* say anything. His throat is tight, his tongue heavy. He just wants to be with them and be held and maybe cry some more, and he

feels like if he just does all of that, he'll be okay, in the end.

"A-and..." Dream takes a deep breath and Sapnap hears it rattle in his chest, the nervous stutter. "I guess, if we're...trying the honesty thing...I guess I should talk about, I dunno, stuff. Too. My stuff, too, maybe."

"Yeah, probably." George says and Sapnap feels his hand, heavy and familiar on the back of his neck, squeezing lightly. It isn't often that George flexes the years he has on them; they're practically meaningless, after a lifetime together, but they're there and this is a time when Sapnap can feel them. He knows George is doing the same to Dream because, despite the tension in his words, Dream stays relaxed and close, not letting Sapnap go even a little bit.

"I...I was in the Nether for a long time." Dream says slowly. "It felt like lifetimes. Sometimes, it felt like I was in there longer than I was out. I don't think about it as often as I used to. I think I'm starting to forget, honestly, like...like my brain is trying to make me forget. There's stuff I can't talk about, not right now, maybe not for a long time, but... maybe I'll forget. I dunno. It's hazy now, but I can remember the heat and the fear and the creatures and the fighting. And I remember wondering again and again why you hadn't come back for me."

"Dream..." George starts, sad, and Sapnap wishes he could echo it but he still can't speak so he hopes that Dream can feel how tightly Sapnap is holding him, how sorry he is that Dream had to fight his way back to them instead of the other way around. Just once, Sapnap wishes that he and George had been the ones to save Dream.

"I know why you didn't, now. I knew why you didn't as soon as I...as I became XD, when I gained the knowledge. But I was still so angry, and hurt, and just - mad. I felt really betrayed, like maybe you guys just didn't love me as much as I thought you did. Like I wasn't worth it."

"No," Sapnap finally manages to choke out, "No, you're worth it. If I'd known, I would have gone after you that night, Dream. You know that, right? I would have jumped in after you without blinking."

"Me, too." George shoves both of their heads closer until the three of them are uncomfortably mashed together, "Gods, I want to just - beat you both black and blue. *Idiots*, both of you. Dream, you just - I love you so much. Have you really, like, soaked in the knowledge that the throne knew I loved you *so much* that it *stole you from my memories* so that I wouldn't get any ideas about trying to destroy it. And *you*, Sapnap -" George laughs incredulously, "Anything. I'd do anything for you, *stupid*. I told XD I'd fight him for you. I would have let my kingdom burn for you. All of our running was for you. Even without my memories of Dream, I went after the throne again because I wanted you to be happy. Both of you are just -"

Sapnap sniffs, breath hitching. Words of devotion aren't uncommon from Dream, but George is another story. Sapnap thinks he could count how many times George has told him he loved him on two hands and still have fingers left over. He lets George push him back until both he and Dream are facing him and Sapnap sees that Dream is crying, too, eyes and nose red as cherries.

"I know I don't like to talk about my feelings." George looks at them both, arms crossed and face serious, "Because I think words are stupid and you should both plainly be able to tell that I don't give a fuck about people outside of you and maybe, if I'm feeling generous, the rest of the people in this house. But apparently you both need to hear this because both of you are trying to hide and I don't like it. I love both of you. You're my best friends. I don't care if you hate me, I don't care if you're mad at me, I don't care if you're mad at each other, I don't care if you resent me or think I'm being a dick, or if you need space or *whatever*. I will love you anyway. If you need to yell at me, or cry, or talk - just *do it*. I'm going to love you before and during and after. Now stop making

me say that I love you, because it's starting to sound silly hearing it out loud!"

"We didn't *make* you," Dream says, hands over his eyes and head tilted back. Despite it, wetness is still escaping from under his palms. "You did it yourself."

"You love us," Sapnap agrees and he's trying to tease, but his voice is rough and wet and he can't get his breathing under control quite yet. He isn't hot enough to steam yet, so his cheeks are damp and he tries to scrub the tears off his face, only for them to be replaced with more.

George is obviously trying to hold it together and he's surprisingly succeeding, blinking rapidly so that only a few tears escape as he scowls. "I do. So if you need to talk, then talk. Dream, you are worth it. Sapnap, you are *safe*. We're together now, finally. Out of that stupid fucking castle, away from that stupid fucking throne. We're free."

Sapnap nods, forcing himself to take deep, measured breaths that fill his lungs and expand his chest. It helps him stop the tears and get control back, helps him lower the rising temperature of his skin.

George watches them both, still frowning, but Sapnap can see the fondness on his face and when he sighs and opens his arms, neither Sapnap nor Dream hesitate to hug him back. Being held by George feels different from Dream; he isn't as all-encompassing the way that Dream's height and bulk make him, but it feels just as safe. Dream might punch his demons away, but George can just look at them with the imperial stare he denies he has and they'll scamper with their tail between their legs. Sapnap *is* safe here, and he feels it, with George's arms around them and Dream right next to him, both of them sniffling pathetically while George calls them brats under his breath.

Sapnap thinks of the woman and the apple and understands why she felt like she had to eat the whole thing. This feels like his second bite. As long as the future has less breakdowns and more conversations, he won't need another.

The next few days consist of Dream and George taking every moment that Skeppy allows it to be in the room. Dream is able to stay longer as the room requires progressively less heat to sustain Sapnap, but George is there more often than not because the heat doesn't bother him as much.

Sapnap takes to sleeping between them again, just like when all of them were kids. Dream curls up along his back and George will sleep on his other side, sometimes pressed close and sometimes with space between them, always the perfect amount for whatever Sapnap is feeling at the time. His parents are in and out, Bad taking brief looks at his flame and Skeppy force-feeding him blaze powder soup, but otherwise leaving him to reforge his bond with his brothers. They watch, the next time Bad pulls his flame out, and Sapnap sees the way George literally sits on his hands so he won't reach for it.

He thinks he must have missed something because Skeppy is weirdly attentive to both George and Dream, as if he is trying to make something up to them. At one point, Sapnap watches Skeppy take them both aside one at a time and he's curious but knows to leave it be. If it's meant for him, he'll be told at some point. Whatever it is, both of them come back from their chats with weight off their shoulders and red rimming their eyes.

Every day that passes, he misses Karl and Quackity more. The guilt that had awoken in him upon remembering what he'd done had stayed and only grew as time went on. He can't help but worry that every day he lets pass without speaking to them is another day closer to the end of their relationship. More than that, an end to a trust that they'd worked hard to build after leaving Kinoko. He wonders if either of them even wants to see him, if he's ruined all the work that the three of

them have done together.

"You know," George says when Dream has left the room to go get them dinner and Skeppy and Bad have finally gone to explore the outside of the property for the first time since arriving, "They're just outside. If you want to talk to them."

"Oh." Sapnap tries to keep any emotions out of his voice. If it had been anyone but George, he may have gotten away with it.

"It's been almost two weeks, Sap." George lays on his back, stretching his arms out and then crossing them behind his head. Sapnap knows that it's an act set up so he doesn't feel like he's being stared at but it works. He lays on his back, too, matches George's position. They both stare up at Dream's ceiling, dark wood and etched-in stars that Sapnap had watched Dream create three nights ago because they'd been bored.

"I know." He says. "I just..."

George hums encouragingly. If Sapnap closes his eyes, he can imagine that he's back in the castle library. That's always where they used to have conversations like this. He and George can be contentious, they can be argumentative and call each other names and be mean in ways that no one else is allowed to be to either of them, but Sapnap has nearly always been able to talk to George about almost anything without fear. The last year has been an outlier to the decade that they'd known each other previous to it. It feels almost like lancing a wound, to talk to George like this again.

"I'm ashamed." He admits out loud, and it hurts but it feels good, too. "I'm ashamed of myself, for how I was acting. How I treated all of you. What I *said* to them."

"You were sick, Sap." George says gently but Sapnap shakes his head.

"I was," he can admit. "But...my flame being out, it made me weak and powerless. I couldn't protect myself so I tried to...prepare for anything and everything that I thought could happen to us. I was paranoid and I lashed out instead of just...just talking to you. Trusting you. I herded you like you were cattle, George. I thought Dream was going to attack me as soon as my back was turned. I accused Karl and Quackity of betraying us again. I was...I was awful."

"I get that you feel like that." George knocks their elbows together lightly. "But, to be fair to you, it was about time that you got to have a breakdown instead of the rest of us. If you were the backbone of the group all the time, it would be unfair."

Sapnap smiles weakly, but his heart isn't in it.

"I almost hit Quackity." He says and it fills him with self-disgust, the truth of it. "I would have, if Karl hadn't stopped me. I was so mad that he thought I'd do it, that he got between us, but I would have. I would have."

"Sapnap, look at me." George says and, reluctantly, Sapnap does. "You have been hurt so much in the last year. It's understandable that your instincts said you were in danger when you were at your weakest state. I know you're ashamed. I know you blame yourself. But I also know that not even in the *worst* of this would you have touched any of us, *especially* not Quackity. I'm glad Karl got between you because it gave you enough clarity to call for Dream, but you would not have touched Quackity."

"I wanted to."

“I want to hit you all the time.” George looks him dead in the eyes and Sapnap can see the sincerity despite the joke. “What you *wanted* and what you *did* are two different things. You did not and you never would have touched him, and he was scared and Karl was scared, but they both know that you love them and that you would not have physically hurt either of them.”

“I do.” Sapnap swallows. “I love them so much. It’s why it’s so hard to face them. I don’t...it’s bad enough, that he wakes up and sees that *fucker* after a nightmare. I’m...I’m so fucking scared, George. I’m scared that when he looks at me, he’s going to see Schlatt when he’s awake, too. I’m so scared I ruined it. He’ll never feel safe with me again. And Karl...gods, he’s so small and he felt like he had to protect Quackity from me.”

George rolls onto his side so he’s facing Sapnap and Sapnap again mirrors him without much thought, lets himself be pulled closer so there isn’t much space left. George’s heat is comforting and familiar and Sapnap closes his eyes and breathes in his scent. There is no fear. No sour alcohol, despite the ghost of that stench constantly in the back of his throat even so many days later.

“I think that you’re putting a lot of words in their mouths without letting them speak for themselves.” George says simply. “And I think that telling Quackity he’ll never feel safe around you again instead of *asking* how he’s feeling, or telling Karl that you’ve ruined everything because he needed to de-escalate a situation when you weren’t fully yourself is the only way you’re *actually* going to tank this relationship. You have to talk to them.”

Sapnap breathes in and out slowly, throat tight. He nods and chokes out, “I know.”

“They are scared.” George says and Sapnap’s heart drops into his stomach until he continues, “But it’s *for* you, idiot. Not *of* you. They’re out there every morning and every night, doing their best to keep you alive. They miss you. They want to talk to you.”

“I want to talk to them.” Sapnap admits. He does. He wants to so badly. Sometimes, when George and Dream are sleeping, Sapnap lies awake between them and aches for Karl and Quackity in ways he’s never experienced before. He wants to see them so, so badly, even despite the fear that clutches at him.

“Then talk to them.” George shrugs. “Tomorrow, because it’s dinner time now.”

“Can’t apologize on an empty stomach?”

“Hell no. Your parents would kill us.”

Sapnap laughs, and it’s as he’s laughing that Dream pushes the door open.

“I’ll take it from here, Q,” Dream says distractedly, “Thanks for helping.”

“No problem,” Quackity’s voice, quiet and unlike the him that Sapnap has come to know, drifts through the door. Sapnap snaps up, the first hint of Quackity in so long sending his heart into overdrive, but the door closes before he can catch even a glimpse and the disappointment makes him wilt.

“Tomorrow.” George says as he sits up, patting Sapnap’s arm soothingly.

“What?” Dream blinks, three bowls with plates balanced atop them carefully arranged in his arms, “Did I miss something?”

“Sapnap misses his boyfriends.” George makes grabby hands, “Now feed me, Dream, I’m

starving."

Sapnap shoots him a glare, but he can't argue. He does miss them. Tomorrow. He's going to talk to them tomorrow.

Sapnap is in knots by the time the knock comes.

Skeppy and Bad have taken a stroll down to the village and George and Dream vacated to give them some privacy. He's been waiting for nearly twenty minutes and he's pretty sure he's about to burn the upholstery of the fluffy chair Bad must have dragged in at some point. It had felt odd, the idea of speaking to Karl and Quackity again for the first time in so long sitting in bed while they stood. This way, he'll be in a chair. Karl will probably flop onto the floor and Sapnap can join him and then Quackity can take the chair. Hopefully that will make him feel more comfortable, being the tallest in the room.

He stands when the knock echoes, a soft thing with a hint of rhythm. Karl.

"Come in." he calls, shifting nervously. He bunches his fists into the hem of his shirt and then smoothes it down as best he can. He's dressed properly, at least, with real pants and a nice shirt that he hopes isn't *too* nice. He'll ruin it with tears, if this goes bad.

The door creaks open and a familiar bush of brown hair and bright blue eyes peeks in.

"Sapnap." Karl says, smiling as he steps into the room, and Sapnap wants to say his name but he can't, arrested as he is by the sight.

Karl looks - tired, but happy to see him. His hair is wild, curls going this way and that. His cloak is in the pile of Sapnap's bedding, carefully folded up this morning by Sapnap's own hand. Sapnap picks it up carefully, the enchanted cloth comforting between his fingers.

"Hi." Sapnap manages to say after a moment of just - looking. An itch he hadn't even realized was there is finally eased as Karl laughs, just once, a giddy, nervous sort of giggle.

"Hi." Karl crosses his arms and then drops them, "You look a lot better."

"Thank you." Sapnap says and holds the cloak out. "And thank you for this. It was...it helped."

"You can keep it, if you need it still." Karl steps forward, takes hold of the cloak but doesn't pull it out of his hands. They just sort of...stand there, holding the cloak together. It should be awkward, but it isn't. Sapnap just feels - happy. He feels happy to see Karl.

"I've had it for a long time." Sapnap looks down, glances up nervously. "You probably miss it."

"I don't miss the cloak nearly as much as I miss you, Sap." Karl says kindly. "If it will make you feel better, I want you to have it."

Sapnap, a lump forming in his throat, nods. Carefully, he pulls the cloak to his chest. Even without wearing it, the enchantments woven into the fabric immediately warm him, make him feel calmer and safer. Just like the man in front of him. He had been so off-balance, so unsure, but Karl is just standing there, looking at him, and Sapnap feels so stupid for ever thinking that Karl would do anything but comfort him.

"I miss you, too." he says quietly. "Where's...?"

Karl's face drops. Sapnap tries not to let that hurt as badly as it does.

"He's...he isn't mad. He's just...he wasn't ready."

"Because I scared him."

"Because he doesn't want to hurt you." Karl corrects gently. He reaches out slowly, gives Sapnap the chance to duck away, but Sapnap wants nothing more than for Karl to touch him right now. When Karl gathers him into a hug, the cloak between them, Sapnap tucks his face into Karl's shoulder and clings tightly. He has to consciously keep his temperature down so he doesn't hurt him, but Karl doesn't seem to mind his hot skin because he holds him just as tight.

"Quackity is worried that he's going to cause you stress and it will make you sick again." Karl says carefully. "He wants to wait until you're healthy enough to leave the room before you talk. It isn't because he hates you. He isn't afraid of you. He loves you, and I love you."

Sapnap nods once, squeezing his eyes shut. He wants to say: *He should be. He should hate me. You should hate me. I understand if you hate me.*

Instead, he breathes Karl in and lets himself be held and soaks in how much he's missed him.

"How have you been?" He asks when he's gathered himself up. He can't just demand that Quackity come visit him. Quackity has set this boundary and Sapnap wants to honor it. He isn't healthy enough to leave the room yet, so he doesn't get to see Quackity. It only gives him more reason to get better faster. For now, he will focus on this, on Karl, on who he has in front of him.

"So-so." Karl laughs, "Your parents are running us through my stocks like it's candy. I'm going to have to go to Pandora to stock up soon."

"They're *brewing*?"

"Skeppy is *cooking* with them!" Karl says as he leads Sapnap to the bed and sits on the edge with him, "He keeps making new things and then tasting them and then tossing them out or making *me* drink them! I have recipes he can follow, you know, but he wants to try it all himself through trial and error. I can barely stop him from making the poisons."

Sapnap winces, thinking about the recipes.

"I...I have to tell you something." He says, dropping his eyes to their hands. Karl has gathered his to hold while he's talked and Sapnap has happily let him, but he feels the guilt eating at him and just needs to confess it all.

"Okay." Karl says simply and looks at him, serious and open. "I'm listening."

"That time you were looking for your bag and I found it...I went through it." Sapnap clears his throat, "I snooped through it. I read your recipes notebook. At the time, I don't know what I was doing. Looking for proof that you were spying, maybe. I don't know. I'm sorry."

"I forgive you." Karl shrugs. "Whatever. I needed to go through that bag, anyway."

"Karl, this is serious."

"I'm being serious." Karl squeezes his hands, lips twitching into a small smile. "Sapnap, I forgive you. You were going through something, you did something not very nice, you regretted it, you told me, you won't do it again without good reason. You're forgiven."

“I violated your privacy,” Sapnap’s lips twist, discomfort and shame welling up, “I shouldn’t have done that. I shouldn’t have yelled at Quackity like that or scared either of you. I shouldn’t have treated you the way I did. I shouldn’t have -”

“Sap.” Karl interrupts, sounding fond enough to hurt, “No, you shouldn’t have done those things. They upset me and hurt my feelings. There were underlying circumstances, but it was still a rough time and it sucked that it happened. I’m sorry that I didn’t try harder to reach out. I forgive you for all of it. Between you and Quackity is between the two of you, but I -” Karl brings his hands up to his lips, kisses Sapnap’s fingers lightly between each word, “forgive you. I forgive you. I love you. I’m happy you’re doing better. I’m so, so happy I get to see you again.”

Sapnap blinks, eyes burning. He knows he’s starting to heat up and tries to pull his hands back but Karl just holds on tighter even as Sapnap is sure he’s hot enough to scald him.

“You...” he sniffles, “Fuck, Karl. You’re so dumb. Be angry at me.”

“No.”

“Be upset and betrayed and annoyed and tell me I should have talked to you instead of being a raging asshole for weeks on end. Tell me that I was awful.”

“No.” Karl smiles wider. “I’m not upset, I’m not betrayed, I’m not annoyed. I wish you’d talked to me but I could have tried harder to talk to you. You’re not awful. Sap, how are you not understanding? You’re the best person I’ve ever met. There is no one in the entire world who I adore in the exact same way that I adore you.”

“But -”

“Go through my shit. Yell at me sometimes. Make me boil blaze powder for two weeks.” Karl reaches up, cups Sapnap’s cheek with a hand so gentle it wounds him, “Just make sure that you let me keep loving you while you do it. That’s all I need.”

“What the fuck.” Sapnap breathes in roughly, “What the *fuck*, Jacobs, I’m trying to apologize, you can’t just -” his voice cracks and he has to try again, “You can’t just *say that* shit to me, I’m sick.”

“Sorry.” Karl apologizes, leaning forward to lean their foreheads together in something far too delicate to be a Badlands greeting, “I’ll be here until you get better, and then I’ll be here after that. I’ll tell you what I told Quackity. We’re going to be happy. We’re going to be free. That is going to be our story. It doesn’t have to be perfect, it just has to be ours.”

Sapnap sobs as he exhales, a typhoon of emotions buffering his insides. He manages to keep the tears at bay, but he can’t breathe properly for a long time. Karl doesn’t seem to mind. He just sits in the quiet, until Sapnap has gathered himself. He sits as Sapnap tells him everything about how he’d felt, the fear and the paranoia and the constant, constant anxiety. The diametrically opposed desires to both send Karl and Quackity far, far away so they couldn’t hurt him and to keep them close so no one could hurt them. The ingrained knowledge that they were working for Schlatt, and the unwavering idea that Schlatt was coming back to steal them away and get his revenge on them.

“I’m so sorry,” Karl swipes his thumbs under Sapnap’s eyes, looking so sad, “That sounds terrifying, Sap. I’m so sorry.”

“I didn’t know what to do.” Sapnap clenches his eyes, “I’d just sit on the porch and hold Nightmare and stare into the gardens every single night, all night, and then I’d come in and pretend I was sleeping when you guys woke up and I wouldn’t know if you’d somehow tricked me into doing it

or if you were in so much danger you didn't even realize. I didn't *know*."

"It's okay." Karl soothes, long arm coming around Sapnap's shoulder and keeping them close, "That must have been so hard. I'm sorry you had to do it alone."

"I wouldn't have *had* to if I'd just *told* one of you. Or written to my parents."

"Sapnap." Karl offers his palm and Sapnap lets him lace their fingers together, palm to palm. "Do you blame Quackity for calling Schlatt?"

"What?"

"Just think about it." Karl says patiently. "Think about it, okay? Do you blame Quackity for calling Schlatt?"

"I..."

"Take a minute." Karl taps his fingers against the back of Sapnap's hand, "Think about it."

Sapnap takes a minute and thinks about it. His immediate answer is yes, but it rings false. Quackity...Quackity hadn't talked about *why* he'd made that decision, after that short conversation in the cells, but Sapnap remembered nearly every word. He'd said that he'd been scared. That Technoblade had brought up memories, memories of what Sapnap had put together was the loss of his wings. He'd said that hearing that Sapnap regretted saving him during the coup had scared him, and that going back to Schlatt was like walking without realizing where he was going and ending up somewhere familiar. He'd been scared and upset and he'd wanted to feel safe and Sapnap had said something in his grief that had made Quackity think it would be safer with Schlatt. He'd been vulnerable and upset and he'd made a bad decision, but one that Sapnap could see made sense, in a twisted way.

"He called Schlatt because he didn't think he was safe and he thought it was the only thing he could do." Sapnap finally says. "I think it was a bad decision, but I don't blame him for making it."

"That's sound logical, I think." Karl nods. "So let's apply it here. You didn't tell any of us, because you didn't think we were safe and it was the only thing you could do. I think that was a bad decision, but I don't blame you for making it."

Sapnap blinks, staring down at their hands. Karl's nails are painted, still, but he can tell that the coating is old and shaky. Flakes have chipped off. A few nails are bare. What Sapnap thinks was meant to be green has only a few spots left and the rest are flaky black.

"I don't like that you can just make things sound so simple." He mutters, "It feels so big and complicated. And then you talk and suddenly it's like...it makes more sense."

"I'm sorry." Karl laughs, soft huffs of breath, "Should I not do that anymore?"

"Don't stop." Sapnap carefully pulls at Karl's fingers and Karl lets him play, "I hate it but...but it helps. Thank you."

"Any time." Karl tips Sapnap's face up with his free hand, fingertips gently touching his chin to guide him up to look. It's not often that Sapnap feels small; even against Dream, he rarely feels his height. He feels small right now, looking up at Karl, who stares down at him with soft, fond blue eyes and a smile.

"You, Sapnap," Karl says gently, "Saved me. You and Quackity changed me. I love you and I

forgive you and if you're mad at me about what's happened in our past, I understand and accept it. If you need to take a break from me or both of us in order to figure your feelings out, I understand and accept it. I will love you if you stay, I will love you if you go, and I will love you and wait for you until you tell me to stop. And, probably, I'll wait for you after that, too."

"I don't want to go." Sapnap says weakly, voice shot, "I don't want to leave."

"I don't want you to, either." Karl leans down and kisses his forehead, his cheeks. When Sapnap closes his eyes, Karl kisses his eyebrows and lashes as he talks. "But I know that sometimes leaving is how we best remember what we love about being home."

"I love you." Sapnap says and when Karl kisses him, he tastes what Karl doesn't say on his lips and it makes him weep. Karl kisses him and Sapnap kisses back, a hand on his jaw, their palms together. Sapnap *feels* Karl's emotions in the kiss. Karl is willing to let him go, if he has to go. He's willing to wait, if Sapnap asks him to. He understands. It helps Sapnap come closer to a decision, but he still needs to talk to Quackity before he can set it in stone.

Karl manages to keep it together long enough to get downstairs, once Dream comes in with dinner and he leaves Sapnap with kiss-swollen lips and a promise to come by in the morning to check in. Then he finds the corner of the library, where no one but him comes, and he cries into a moth-eaten curtain for a solid half-hour. He doesn't regret making sure Sapnap had his cloak, but he wishes he had it all the same.

He wishes a lot of things.

It's truly night by the time he's all cried out, and he's sure his eyes are red raw by the time he slips into the kitchen, pulls out a kettle, and sets to making tea. Quackity may still be wandering the house, or perhaps he is already in bed. Karl is breaking routine right now, but he needs to calm his nerves before Quackity sees him or he is going to scare the fuck out of him.

He makes a careful cup of tea, measuring and steeping and stirring precisely in an attempt to steady his mind.

It doesn't work. Sapnap is thinking about leaving. Karl had tasted it in his kiss, that Sapnap hadn't set the idea aside.

Karl hadn't lied. If Sapnap needed to go, then Karl would wait. He'd wait as long as he needed to for Sapnap to come back.

It would fucking hurt, though. It's the first time Karl would be on this end of running away. He's painfully familiar with the urge to run, but the urge to come back when the situation is still fraught isn't one he can relate to. What if Sapnap leaves and realizes he is happier without them? What will Karl tell Quackity? What will Karl do with *himself*? Not since the moment he'd realized what the three of them shared had Karl doubted this relationship.

He still doesn't doubt it, he tells himself, lifting his shaking mug to his lips. It clinks painfully against his teeth and he sets it down with more force than quite necessary.

He doesn't doubt their relationship. He would wait. If Sapnap needs time and space to heal and grow, then Karl *will* give him that. Karl will do what Sapnap needs him to do. If he leaves, Sapnap will come back to them when he is ready. He'll come back to them when he is stronger and healthier and more able and ready to have the sort of relationship that all of them want and need.

Karl can stay here and he and Quackity will build a quiet little life. He will move his library over

and Quackity will have his garden. Dream and George may go with Sapnap or they may stay. In either case, Karl *can* make a happy life for himself here while they wait. He can.

But gods. Gods, will he miss Sapnap. The last two weeks have been a hell that Karl has never experienced before. Constant worry, a gnawing guilt that he could have, should be doing *more*. Trying to appease his sort-of in-laws, trying to help Quackity without overstepping or smothering, trying to assist Dream and George while not being so jealous that his skin changes to green because *they* were allowed to see Sapnap when Karl's last view of him had been his beloved shivering in a sweltering room, fighting for his life.

His own instincts to run had popped up more than once. Everything was stressful and painful and worrisome. None of it was easy, none of it was fun. He'd only had Quackity in the dark of the night, too timid to touch, for days and days until Quackity had allowed something more. The blaze powder soup was no easy feat to keep brewing, nor was being under constant stares by Skeppy or Bad every time one left Sapnap's side. He had barely spoken to either Dream or George in days, now, as they spent most of their time either sleeping, being at Sapnap's side, or doing chores while Karl and Quackity slept. Karl missed his lovers, but he missed his friends, too.

Karl was very used to being on his own but he wasn't used to being lonely. It was anathema to him. Quackity has been there, but only as much as he could be, and Karl would never ever push for more than that but he needs touch like others need air. The last few days, Quackity has allowed them to touch at night and getting to hold Sapnap had made it better, a little bit. Now, though, it's sinking in that he might only get it for a brief while more if Sapnap leaves.

He doesn't realize that he's picked up the mug again, but he does register when it falls from his shaking fingers, splintering against the tiled floor.

The pieces are sharp and his knees are damp with hot tea as he bends down to try and gather it in his hands. It's shattered beyond repair. He can't fix it. It's just a cup, but it was one of the five that Jimmy gave him before they left Kinoko. There are only four now.

All at once, he's crying again. It's the kind of helpless crying that comes with a body that shakes, a headache that sets in immediately. His eyes ache from the salt, and he can barely breathe, barely see, as he sobs over spilled tea and broken ceramic.

Quackity can't see me like this, he thinks helplessly, and the thought of Quackity finding him falling apart only makes him panic more. He isn't enough for Quackity on his own. If Sapnap leaves, how is he going to help Quackity while they both heal? He's kept them afloat but Quackity hasn't been *happy*. How could he, with a piece of his heart missing? Karl can barely even wake up when Quackity has nightmares, and Sapnap has always been so much better at making Quackity feel safe when Schlatt gets brought up. Karl won't be enough. He'll *never* be enough.

"Oh, kiddo," A voice. Not Sapnap, not Quackity, not Dream or George. With his brain breaking apart and oxygen-deprived as he rakes in what little air he can get through his sobs, he doesn't recognize it.

"Hey, hey, hey," It's a calm voice, at least. Getting closer, so Karl wraps his arms around himself even tighter, shards digging into his palms. Warm hands encase his own, light pressure until he drops them, small drops of blood following them to the floor. "I need you to breathe for me. Can you do that?"

"C-can't," He stutters out, "I can't, I can't, I *can't*,"

"Yes, you can," They say, calm and authoritative, "Just copy what I do, alright?"

It's a different kind of breathing than what Quackity and Sapnap do. In for four, hold for seven, out for eight. It makes sure he's focused on the breathing, on the numbers involved, instead of thinking about Quackity keeping Sapnap steady in a dark cave, or Sapnap's forehead pressed to his over Quackity's sleeping form. Karl stutters and messes up his counting, but they don't leave, don't admonish him. They stay, and they breathe with him, until Karl can finally bear to open his eyes.

Bad smiles kindly back at him, face dark as shadow except for two ruby eyes and sharp, tall horns. "There we are. How are you feeling?"

"Like shit," Karl says, voice rough. Bad's presence explains the warm hands. He hates that there's a part of him that wishes it was Sapnap instead.

"Language," Bad says, but there's no heat in it, no fire, "It's alright. This has been tough on everyone."

"It's not alright. I need to get a grip." Karl drags a hand down his face. "They need me right now, I can't be crying over fu - honking *tea* in the middle of the night."

"They do need you," Bad acknowledges, "But it's - Darn it. I'm not having this conversation without something warm. Come on, let's get you another cup."

Bad helps him to stand on wobbly legs, sits him down at the table and begins to bustle around the kitchen. When Karl blinks next, there's a plate of cookies in front of him and a warm mug in his hands.

"I'm sorry," He croaks out, "I should have helped you. I'm being a bad host."

"Don't apologize," Bad says, sitting down opposite him, "Have you ever had a panic attack before?"

"Not like that." He manages to sip at his tea, just a little, "A lot of firsts, I guess. Firsts with them. First time I wanted something more than temporary. First time I'm staying." He taps his finger against the rim of the mug, watching the way that the tea ripples from the motion, "First time I'll be the one waiting."

"He told you?"

Karl shakes his head, "He didn't have to. I knew."

Bad chuckles, "He isn't much of a talker, our Sapnap. Can say words for days just like his father, but actually *talking*? Pah. It's good he's got someone who can read him."

"I don't think I know him as well as I thought I did," Karl admits quietly, "I knew something was wrong, but I thought he would... I waited for him to bring it up on his own. I could have stopped him from getting so sick, I should have stepped in sooner, I could have done something that meant he didn't nearly *die* -"

His voice cracks on the last word, and Bad's hand reaches over and covers his own. He's warmer than Sapnap, noticeably so.

"You can't always see these things," Bad starts, but Karl shakes his head.

"He told me how scared he was," Karl says, a few tears dripping into his tea, "How he couldn't trust us. And it wasn't anything I was used to; it wasn't jealousy or envy, or because he didn't love us, it was because he thought we were going to *kill him*. Gods, all that time he was suffering and I

didn't... I didn't do a single thing to help him. He lashed out because I wasn't there for him first. I forgave him even as he did it, even as he said he...h-hated us, I forgave him, but I don't know how to forgive myself for failing him."

For all that he is comforted by the hand in his, it hurts to be given comfort by the man who surely, *surely*, must hate him for what he did to his son.

"You should have let me finish," Bad says, gentle, "Love blinds us. Makes us hope for the better, see everything through a brighter lens. You are not at fault for not seeing what he was most certainly hiding from you. You are not at fault for hoping that he'd come to you. Maybe you could have brought it up, sure, but Karl... You're not at fault for his flame ending up how it did."

"I am," Karl whispers, "Quackity, he... it makes sense, what he did. What Schlatt made him do, both directly and indirectly. But I just wanted a bit of cash and an adventure to go along with it. Maybe a date or two. And it led to *this*. Sapnap nearly dying because of us. Because of *me*. I haven't changed at all."

His admission hangs in the air between them, heavy and unyielding.

"I won't lie to you, Karl," Bad says, and his voice is careful, deliberate in his tone, "There's a lot of reasons his flame was weak. The stress of the journey, of worrying after George. Grieving Dream. Lack of sleep. Rainstorms. Whatever happened in the throne room that injured his shoulder. Your betrayal."

Karl flinches, but Bad doesn't stop talking, or holding his hand.

"There were so many reasons his flame faltered as much as it did. We all share a portion of the blame, even Sapnap himself. Do you understand?"

"Not really."

"We should have come with you, when you left Kinoko." Bad says, downcast, "We knew losing Dream would have affected him but I'd hoped to find him while Sapnap and George were hiding from Schlatt, and that didn't happen. He's so young, my foolish little sparkling, and his flame is still maturing. I'd hoped that having George to focus on would keep him distracted, keep it fighting, until Skeppy and I could get him to the Badlands. But I knew he would be struggling, eventually. I should have come sooner. I shouldn't have waited until he had to call for us. As a fire demon, as his dad, I have no excuse."

"No, no way." Karl says, "You're his dad, you *saved* him, Bad -"

"Sapnap was just a child when he entered into the prince's service." Bad trails off, eyes drifting into the past, "It was an honor at the time, an allyship between our two countries, something to keep us safe against L'Manburg, which wasn't the wreck it is today back then. In the end, Pandora's council decided that he would be the prince's knight or his betrothed, and Skeppy was vehemently against that. Pandas was already a fighter, already taking to the sword like a duck to water. It was where he would be happiest. More dangerous, perhaps, but at least he wouldn't be forced into a marriage to someone he didn't know."

Karl shivers; would there have been a world where he met George and Sapnap, unhappily married, on the road? A world where Sapnap was alone while his intended loved another? Would they have hated each other? Would they have loved each other differently, growing up affianced rather than as brothers?

Would Karl have even stood a chance? Where would Quackity have ended up in that mess? Dream?

“We gave him the best chance we could,” Bad continues, “But we lost so much. We had to give up our little boy; we let him grow up in the castle, live his own life. We gave him as much freedom as we could, and it...it led to this.”

“To him nearly dying.” Karl says miserably.

“No,” Bad replies, “Well, yes, but it also led to you. To Quackity. And anyone that loves Sapnap as much as you two do is good in my book.”

“Loving him didn’t mean we stopped hurting him,” Karl says. His hands are white-knuckled around his mug and in Bad’s grip.

“Loving doesn’t mean the end of hurting,” Bad responds gently, “You just learn that the hurt is worth it, with them. You can hurt someone in a million different ways; what matters is why, and how you fix it.”

“But Schlatt -”

“Schlatt was cruel and malicious and he liked to make people feel small so that he could feel powerful,” Bad says, firmly, “His actions were deliberate. You two made some bad decisions; terrible decisions, really, but it wasn’t because you *wanted* to hurt Sapnap. Most importantly, you’ve stayed to fix them. You waited for him to be alright with seeing you. You kept him warm, fed, *loved* until we arrived, and then every moment after. Yes, you hurt him. But you’re trying, and that matters, kiddo.”

“How does staying matter more than what we - what *I* did?” Karl argues, “How can I forgive myself, Bad?”

“I don’t know,” Bad says, sitting back in his chair, though he still clasps Karl’s hand, “I don’t know how Skeppy ever forgave me, after everything. It was my political career that put Sapnap in Kinoko in the first place, and there have been so many bad decisions I’ve made in the past.” he sighs. “I’m still working on forgiving myself for some things, too.”

“What happened to Sapnap wasn’t your fault.” Karl says but Bad shakes his head.

“There is more than just that, unfortunately. This...this was a long time ago. Sapnap doesn’t even know the story; it isn’t something either of us like to dwell on,” He sighs, “But it could help you so I’ll tell it. Just...it isn’t a story that Sapnap needs to hear. And only Skeppy and I will ever know the entirety of it. I won’t ask you to keep my secrets for me, but I’d appreciate discretion on this.”

“Okay?” Karl shifts forward, confused.

“When I was young; too young, really, almost younger than Sapnap is now, I was part of a - a group, you could say. There was a being, something uncovered from the earth and it... it promised things. Promised to give us the things we wanted most in the world, and in return...we gave it everything.”

“A *cult*!?” Karl hisses, looking around wildly, half expecting Skeppy to jump out with a ‘Gotcha!', “Bad, you were in a cult!?”

Bad winces, “Like I said; I was young, ambitious, desperate to kickstart my career. They got me early. And that being, it would... it could get into your head, make you think things, twist up your

mind until you didn't know anything except for what it wanted you to do. It wanted *everything* from us. But Skeppy didn't want to let me go," Bad turns his head, staring out of the window at the dark treeline, pitch-black against the inky blue of the night, "We were childhood friends turned more by the time I joined them. He came after me. He saw clearly when I couldn't and we argued and it..."

Karl winces. He's seen them bicker back and forth for a few weeks now, but he can't imagine an argument between the two of them. Skeppy is too obviously enamored, and Bad too obviously whipped. But there's no mistaking the regret on Bad's face, in his voice.

"In the end, my...associates took him to the being so it could control him, and by extension, me. It... it had to control him, wholly and utterly, to stop him fighting back. To get to me. I finally came to my senses, when I saw what it had done to him. I realized that my Skeppy was being hurt because of *me*. It took months to pull him free, get us both out. He was...it wasn't good. It was like going through withdrawal, at first. Painful and terrifying. I'd wanted to change the world but I ended up almost destroying *my* whole world. I had to watch him suffer through it for so long."

Through all of this, Bad has been steady in his tone and rhythm, but here his voice drops, fractures at the edges over well-worn scars.

"Skeppy didn't speak to me for weeks, and when he did, he was furious. Furious and terrified. I had betrayed him, chosen this thing over him for so long. It was my ambition, my hubris, that had led to him being hurt. He couldn't trust me, he couldn't trust his own mind. We spent months in hiding, until we knew for sure my old associates had met their unfortunate ends, until there was no one left to come for us."

Karl watches, mesmerized by the tale, as Bad takes a sip of tea, looking so far away Karl doesn't even think he tastes it.

"During that time, it was up to me to keep us safe. Skeppy had always been the braver of the both of us, my rock foundation. Suddenly that was me, trying to make it up to him, take care of him even though I was certain he hated me. He did, for a little bit." Bad exhales, a long slow breath, "It took a long time. A lot of hard work. There were times where we fought, were utterly vicious to each other. Where we had to leave, take some time to ourselves before we could come back to each other again. But he forgave me. And he loved me. Still loves me, for some reason." At just the thought, his face brightens, his whole countenance lightens. Karl envies him.

"It sounds easy, when you say it like that," Karl says.

"Then I told the story wrong, because it absolutely wasn't." Bad says, "Even now, I can't quite believe it. I wonder every day why Skeppy still stays, after all that happened. Every argument, I worry it will be the last because no matter how right I am, he has a kill-shot loaded if he wanted to use it. And then he smiles at me, or he takes my hand, and I'd take every long year of heartbreak while I waited for a chance to have him just one more day all over again."

Karl hums, turning it over and over, a pebble in his mind.

"I've always run away when things got tough," He admits, finally, and he can feel his eyes welling up once more at the truth of it, "I've never... I've never stayed before. I'm terrified that I'll stay and he won't come back. He'd be right if he didn't. The gods know I've done it enough times to enough people that I deserve it." He wipes at his eyes with the back of his free hand, unable to hold onto his mug anymore for how badly it shakes, "I've never felt like this before. I never thought I'd care so much about anyone, let alone two people. Sometimes, I don't think I can survive loving them. I know I won't survive losing them. And if I...if I fail them again, I don't think I'd survive

that either. I hoped that loving them was enough, because it's all I can *do*."

"It is." Bad says, and it sounds so simple, so clear, "Though that depends on whether you are *just* loving them or if you're choosing to love them."

"What do you mean?"

"Gods, I feel like I should get the three of you into a lecture so I can stop repeating myself," Bad says, and it's with a smile so gentle that Karl is finally able to get his tears under control, "Relationships can't survive off love alone. It's work, it always is, but especially with all the baggage you guys have. You have to choose it. You have to want it more than you fear getting hurt."

"I'm not scared for *me*, Bad," Karl says, "I'm scared for *them*. If I fu - mess up and Sapnap's flame goes out again...if I lose Quackity because I'm not good enough on my own to help him. If I try my best again and again and all we have just falls apart when he's gone. What if I'm...what if I'm not enough for them?"

His last words are almost a whisper, a fear so deep and desperate he can barely admit it to himself, let alone to Bad. He can't look at him, at the father of the man he failed so badly, might still fail. He hadn't been able to protect either of them, back in Kinoko, or the swamps, or the cave, even. He was functionally useless in all ways except perhaps as a particularly wandering map. It isn't a matter of *if* he's enough for them; it's a matter of if they're willing to settle for him, a lying librarian with nothing to his name but some books and a list of names he has to avoid in the streets.

Bad hums, rubs his thumb over Karl's knuckle, "I don't think that's your decision to make. *You* can't decide whether you are or whether you aren't enough for them. Only Sapnap and Quackity can. But from what I've heard of you, Karl Jacobs... You are more than enough." He squeezes Karl's hand, tight, "And I betcha they would love you anyway, just as you would love them. The three of you have something special. My son is lucky to have you here, just loving him as you are."

"I-I don't know what to do if he leaves," Karl stutters over his words, "I'll wait, of course I'll wait for him. I'll wait forever for him if he asks. But I can't imagine a life without him in it, without both of them, together. I don't know what to do."

Bad gives Karl's hand one last squeeze, before standing, gathering their mugs to clean.

"The way I see it, kiddo, is that you have two choices," Bad says as he stands over the sink, "One. You love them, but you don't stay. You run your cost-benefit analysis and staying comes up lacking so you leave before it can really implode and you lose them, but at least you got to leave first. Two. You stay. You make the hard choices, the ones that might hurt. You choose, day after day, week after week to love them, to keep loving them, to *trust* that if you hurt them, it isn't intentional, and if you do, that you love each other enough to figure it out, however long that might take."

Karl stares at Bad's back, teeth clenched. He knows his choice already.

"If you're worried you're not enough for Quackity, *tell him*." Bad turns back around, leans against the kitchen counter and crosses his arms casually. "If you're afraid you might have hurt Sapnap, *ask him*. You might not get the answer you want, at least not at first, but you'll find it together. As long as you love them."

"I do." Karl replies, instantly. "With everything."

"Do you choose Sapnap? Do you choose Quackity? Even with all that's happened to you and between you?"

"Yes," Karl says, and means it, utterly and sincerely. Bad must hear it in his voice, because he smiles, looking at Karl with approval.

"That's good." He says, "So does Sapnap. With all his heart, as it were."

Somehow, Karl can't imagine Sapnap telling Bad anything of the sort. Not voluntarily, anyway.

"How do you know?"

"Karl," Bad says, "I held his flame in my hands. He might as well have been screaming it from the rooftops."

Karl huffs out a laugh, sharp and shocked. His own hand presses to his chest, where a flame would be if he had one.

"He loves us that much?"

He shouldn't be so surprised at that. Perhaps it shouldn't soothe him as much as it does. But his fears are out there now, no longer welling up inside him like a balloon about to burst. Karl still doesn't know if he'll be enough for Quackity, if Sapnap leaves. But he thinks he can bear the thought, now. He knows that Quackity and this quiet little life is enough for him, if need be, while they wait.

"That much," Bad smiles, honest and open, "And even more, Karl."

They'll be enough, Karl decides. No matter how much it hurts. He'll always love them more.

"Now go and get to bed." Bad waves him off, turning back around to rummage for a hand towel, "I'm going to clean up that tea before the ants get to it."

Karl stands up, flustered, "Ah, no, it's okay, I can -"

"Karl." Bad gives him a firm, fatherly look over his shoulder, "Go to bed."

"Yes, sir." Karl says sheepishly, and backs toward the door. "Thank you for - all of that."

"Anything for my future son-in-law." Bad winks at him and it makes Karl chuckle as he turns to leave the room. He's exhausted, he finds, and especially eager to hopefully get some sleep uninterrupted by worry for his lovers.

Quackity is on the other side of the door, leaning against the wall with his arms tightly crossed over his chest.

"I really need to do something about how easy it is to eavesdrop on the kitchen." Karl says, carefully closing the door behind him.

"You weren't in bed." Quackity says by way of explanation. "I came to look for you."

"Sorry." Karl smiles, "You were worried?"

"Yes." Quackity flicks his eyes over Karl's shoulder toward the kitchen before he offers a hand, "Come to bed. I'm tired."

Karl takes his hand. Quackity leads him to their room, down dark hallways and past windows that offer moonlight to see by. Karl just watches Quackity, how the gentle glow of celestial bodies grace him. His wings look almost silver, tucked against his back but otherwise relaxed. They're messy because he and Quackity have both been too busy and stressed to care for them properly. Karl doesn't think he should offer; in this, he is sure he should wait for Quackity to ask.

Their room is comforting and familiar. Quackity stands next to him, still holding his hand while Karl closes and locks the door. Quackity has been doing this every night, maybe a security measure since their first defense sleeps in Dream's room now, and Karl can admit that he, too, likes the idea. He knows Schlatt is gone and that he'll never come back, but sometimes Karl has nightmares, too, and knowing the door is locked brings some measure of comfort.

They both strip down bare in the dark. His clothes are tea-stained and damp, and it's a relief to be out of them. Karl has spent only a handful of nights not at Quackity's side since they started traveling together over a year ago but he still can't help sneaking glances. He and Quackity have had many nights together by this point, but he's still helpless against becoming just a little flustered around all the bare skin. Karl has seen his fair share of bodies but there is something about Quackity and Sapnap both that ignites a sort of fire in him that he doesn't have a name for. They could be bare from toe to hair or they could be covered head to foot and Karl would be as flustered by them as the day he first saw each of them. It's settled into something deeper as time has gone on, less butterflies and more a bone-deep knowledge that Karl's understanding of desire has been rearranged, irreversibly changed by these two.

"Stop staring," Quackity says, yet Karl can hear the gentle, tired teasing.

"I can't help it." Karl turns to him, moonlight practically making Quackity glow in front of him, "You're beautiful."

"You really don't stop," Quackity scoffs and climbs into the bed. He holds the blankets up for Karl, an invitation, and Karl accepts it without hesitation. Quackity practically pulls him closer with gravitational force alone, a collision that ends with their bodies pressed together from feet to shoulders. Karl tucks his face against Quackity's chest, listens to his heartbeat steadily.

Quackity strokes his hair and Karl closes his eyes, breathes out and lets his body go lax under the gentle touches. There's an empty space at his back that he'd give anything for Sapnap to fill, an empty space in his heart that he'd give even more for Sapnap to return to. Quackity holds him together but despite the talks with Bad and having been with Sapnap only a few hours ago, he so desperately misses him. If this will soon be the usual state of being, Karl may go crazy from it.

"What did you hear?" He asks once he's got control of himself.

"It would have been weird if Sapnap and George got married." Quackity says by way of answer.

"I know, right?" Karl laughs, a bit hysterical. That much. Quackity had been there for that much of him losing it to their maybe-one-day-father-in-law. "They probably would have killed each other."

"Probably." Quackity agrees. "Dream would have had to, I dunno, fight for George's hand."

"I'd pay to see that fight."

"As if you didn't ogle them during training every morning, Karl."

Karl giggles, hiding his face in Quackity's chest, "Shh, don't call me out like that. I'm in a fragile place right now, it's mean to bully me."

“You brought it up, so now we can talk about it.” Quackity says promptly. “Did you mean it, that stuff you said to Bad? Or were you just upset?”

Karl sobers up, tracing careful sigils on Quackity’s skin with his fingers as he thinks about how to answer the question. He could lie. Quackity would let it go. But he thinks of Bad’s words, and he thinks about Sapnap sleeping in another room because he was too scared to be honest with them, and he can’t.

“I meant it.” He says quietly. “I’m worried Sapnap will need to take some time for himself before he comes back to us. I’m worried that if he leaves, I won’t be enough for you. I’m worried I won’t be able to be what you need, that I won’t be able to protect you or make sure you feel safe.”

The hand in his hair goes still, but Quackity’s fingers stay tangled up in his curls.

“There’s a lot to process in that statement.” Quackity settles on saying. Karl hears the way his heart rate goes higher, can feel it. Still, Quackity doesn’t try to shift away, and Karl lets himself curl closer, throw a leg over his and wrap his arms around his waist. He’s clinging and he doesn’t want to make Quackity uncomfortable, but he craves physical comfort more than anything right now. Quackity curls his arm across Karl’s shoulders, his other hand touching his hip, holding him close.

“I’m sorry.”

“For what? Telling me how you feel?” Quackity sighs, “Sometimes, I think you two think I’m made of glass. You know there are people that are scared of *me*, right? I’m not...I love that I feel protected and safe with you. I love that, Karl. But I won’t fall apart if you two aren’t there with swords and potions. I can keep myself safe.”

“I know.” Karl lifts his head, needing to look at Quackity’s face, “You made it your whole life before us, Q. You’re the strongest person I know, surviving as long as you have. I know you can take care of yourself.”

“Then trust me,” Quackity says, kissing his knuckles, “I’m not going to shatter when you turn your back.”

“I know you won’t,” Karl replies, “I just...I don’t want you to ever feel unsafe. If I had my way, you’d never be scared again for the rest of your life.”

Quackity smiles, reaching up to cradle Karl’s jaw in his hand. “You’re sweet, in a really dumb way.”

“It’s my charm.” Karl leans his face into Quackity’s hand, sighing at the cool touch.

“I don’t need you to keep me safe from the world, Karl.” Quackity’s thumb rubs a slow line along the bridge of Karl’s cheek, “Can you just be there beside me while we go through it?”

“Always.” Karl says earnestly. “You’re stuck with me now.”

“Then you’re enough.” Quackity leans down and Karl strains up to meet him in a chaste kiss. When Quackity continues, it’s between brushes of their lips. “Just you is more than enough.”

Karl blinks. When his eyes start to burn, he tries to fight the tears back. He doesn’t want to cry again. He already has a raging headache from the kitchen.

“Am I?” he asks weakly, only the darkness of the room and the trust he has in the man beside him allowing him to voice the thought.

“*More* than enough. Exactly what I need.” Quackity trails his kisses up Karl’s face, ending with one in the middle of his forehead. “I love you, Karl. You can doubt yourself, but never doubt that. You saved me from that room. You made all of this happen.” Quackity motions with a tiny movement to the room around them. “Just you is who saved all of us from Schlatt. You’re stronger than you’re giving yourself credit for.”

Karl swallows, tongue too heavy to speak. He hides his face again, nods once, and hopes Quackity doesn’t mind that he gets tears on his shoulder. Quackity must not, because his big hand settles on the back of Karl’s head, holding him close, letting him sniffle quietly until he can control himself again.

“I love you, too.” he rasps, barely words.

“I know.” Quackity says, sleep coloring his own voice.

It makes Karl feel warm, the security in Quackity’s voice. Maybe Karl can’t fight Quackity’s dragons for him, but then again, maybe he doesn’t need to. He did *this*. He made sure that Quackity knows exactly how loved he is. He’s going to see Sapnap in the morning and he’s going to make sure Sapnap knows how loved he is, too. That’s enough, for now.

Taking that first breath of fresh air feels like being fucking born again. Sapnap doesn’t push Dream’s careful hands away as he’s helped down the staircase, but he does give him a sharp glower when Dream looks like he’s reaching for a pair of crutches scrounged up from somewhere. His legs might be a bit shaky, but he’s been moving around the bedroom on his own well enough and besides; he has reasons for not wanting a chaperone outside today.

It takes longer than it should for him to make it down to Quackity’s little herb garden, but at the same time, he can’t be angry at himself or his weakened limbs. He wants to take it all in; the wind in his hair, the sun on his face, for what feels like the first time in forever.

Quackity’s garden is...well, happily messy. It’s organized, in a sense, but plants don’t tend to stick to straight lines and rigidly defined territories. When they had first arrived, it had been covered in brambles and weeds. Underneath, though, the soil was rich and dark, and Quackity had spent long days under the hot Badlands sun, encouraging the garden to thrive. All it needed was a little love and care, alongside some well-placed pruning. When he needed a few hours to himself, Quackity would come out here, bury his hands in the dirt, and help coax something beautiful from the dirt.

Sapnap heads for a stone bench at the end of the garden, cool granite that had been merely carved out of the large rock at the end of the garden sometime a hundred years ago. The lemon tree that hangs over it is older than anyone left living, except perhaps Philza. Sapnap remembers tying rope to the branches, swinging to and fro every day, going higher and higher until one day it snapped and he flew off and landed in a bramble patch. There’s still the remnants of rope clinging to the thickest branch. In the shade, the stone under him is cool, and sunlight dances through the gaps in the leaves, pressing gentle kisses to Sapnap’s skin. He tilts his head back and closes his eyes.

He’s warm. He’s calm. The world is peaceful around him; there’s no fear, no worry that he is in danger, that the others are in danger, or *are* the danger. Part of that, he knows, is the presence of his parents. He doesn’t know to what extent it will last when they leave.

Assuming, that is, he doesn’t go with them. That thought, however, churns a roiling sea in his gut and so he tries not to think about it, focusing instead on the air that smells of basil and rosemary, the faint tang of lemon on his tongue.

“You’re here.”

Quackity’s voice is hesitant, hanging in the air like some frantic insect, stuttering even over a few words. Sapnap’s heart skips a beat in his chest.

“Hey,” He replies, and his voice is rough, and he has to swallow to keep it steady. He doesn’t look up, but he shuffles to the side of the bench, “Plenty of room for two, if you want.”

“Right,” Quackity says, and Sapnap listens as he steps closer, sets himself down ever so carefully as if the bench were made of glass rather than granite. He leaves nearly the entire bench between them. It’s enough space for two people.

Deliberately, Sapnap puts his hand on the middle of the bench, palm up. Quackity doesn’t touch it, not yet, but he puts his hand next to Sapnap’s and the two of them wait for the first person to speak.

“Okay,” Quackity says at the same time that Sapnap starts with a “So -”

Another pause before they try again, and once again, it’s Sapnap saying “No, you -” while Quackity replies with “You go, dude, I’m fine -”.

Then it’s all too much and they’re both giggling like children, the smile on Sapnap’s face making his jaw ache and tears bead at his eyes. It’s nervous, and unsure, and Sapnap isn’t entirely sure that it’s even nice laughter, but it happens.

Eventually, Sapnap can bear it no longer. He raises his head and sees Quackity for the first time in weeks.

He looks...

Objectively, he looks terrible. He has dark circles under his eyes, and his fingers look like they’ve been worked red raw. There’s calluses that Sapnap knows come from the axe they use to chop wood, dry skin where he’s been scrubbing the laundry too long. His clothes are crumpled, and his hair is tattered, unwashed, his beanie pulled on so low that it covers his brows.

Subjectively, he’s more beautiful than he’s ever been. He’s exhausted, shoulders tight, but he doesn’t flinch away and his giggles are unhindered. He doesn’t reek of fear, his head ducked with laughter, his neck unbruised in the gentle summer sun. His wings, though unkempt, are open and a few feathers are fluttering in the wind. All the scabs have healed over, the down finally finishing growing over the scars in the weeks that Sapnap has been away from him. Soft sunlight dapples through his wings, making them shine with all the colors of a sunset, of molten gold, of warm woolen jumpers in winter. He’s close enough that Sapnap can smell him; essentially Quackity. There is something sickly sweet below it all, of course there is, but he can tell the difference between nervousness and fear. He can’t smell any alcohol at all.

In the free space of this garden Quackity has made his own, the wind through his feathers and his hair, he could almost be flying. With the sunlight around him, haloing him in golden light, he could be an angel.

And then Quackity is looking at him, and Sapnap can barely breathe.

“You’re out of the room.” Quackity says when Sapnap doesn’t fill the silence.

“I am.” Sapnap looks down at his legs, slightly aching from lack of use. His muscles are going to start wasting away soon. He knows he lost a lot of weight while he was out, eating only soup, and

from the weeks previous, when he was refusing to touch anything Karl had cooked. If Quackity looks objectively terrible, then Sapnap is sure he isn't much better. He's alive, though. Quackity is alive. They're alive. "Weak, but I'll live."

"Good." Quackity says, the levity leaving his face, "I was worried."

"I'm sorry." Sapnap bites his lip. What is he apologizing for? Which part? Would Quackity want an apology for each infraction, or would he prefer one large one? "For making you worry. I'm better now. I'm getting better."

"Good." Quackity says again and goes quiet. Sapnap shifts awkwardly, unsure how to continue. He and Quackity, they talk - of course they do. They joke and tease and they can even be serious, but conversations like these...ones where it's going to hurt before it gets better - they've never done it before. He and Quackity tend to just understand each other, and push away what they can't reconcile. Then again, look where not talking got them so far. A cell in the ground or a garden silent with insecurity.

"Bad says I'm going to be weaker for a while." Sapnap goes on nervously. "He says my flame can sustain itself now, but...but I'll have trouble with temperature control and stuff. My shoulder is fucked, too. I'm..." he leans on his thighs, clasping his hands between his knees. "I'm not much the knight you remember from the coup anymore, am I?"

Quackity doesn't answer for a long time. The wind breezes past them, rustling his feathers, shifting Sapnap's forehead ribbon.

"I don't remember the coup much." Quackity finally says and Sapnap frowns.

"I thought..."

"Before I found you again," Quackity continues, voice far away, "I'd dream about you. Every day that passed, you became fuzzier in my mind. By the time we met, you didn't even have a face in my dreams. You were just a shining light. A safe haven. Warm where your palm touched me, but faceless. Ultimately impersonal."

"I'm sorry."

"Why are you apologizing?"

"I don't know." Sapnap presses his palms together until his fingers are white. "Sometimes I hate myself for not just...somehow knowing how much I'd come to love you and taking you with me."

"That's kind." Quackity says quietly. "But I wouldn't have gone with you that night. I wasn't ready to leave him yet, Sap."

"I know."

"Do you?"

"No," Sapnap admits. "I still don't understand. I'm trying to, though."

"I appreciate that." Quackity hums. "But my point is that I didn't know the knight that saved me during the coup. I know *you*. I don't care if you're like him, Sapnap. I care that you're you."

Sapnap breathes in slowly and exhales.

“You don’t smell like fear.” He tilts his head to look at Quackity and is once again nearly bowled over by him. If he couldn’t take his eyes off Karl, then he can barely manage to look at Quackity for snatches of time before he’s forced to drop his eyes again. “But I don’t need to smell it to know you’re angry.”

“I am.”

“At me.”

“Yes.”

Sapnap feels - relief. He’s been met with nothing but understanding, nothing but kindness, nothing but forgiveness. He wants anger. He understands anger. He thinks a part of him needs anger right now.

“Can you talk to me about it?” He asks, sitting up straight again. The leaves of the tree rustle at a particularly gusty burst of wind and he closes his eyes, enjoys the coolness on his skin, pretends for just a moment that it’s Quackity’s hands on him.

“I don’t know.” Quackity says thoughtfully. “I’ll be honest. I’ve never, like...expressed anger at a romantic partner. I don’t know how to do it.”

Sapnap flinches.

“However you need to.” He says firmly. “I won’t...I’m not...I don’t *want to be* like any romantic partners you’ve had in the past. I know I’ve done a pretty shitty fucking job of that lately, but...”

“...okay.” Quackity stands up sharply. “You should have talked to one of us.”

Sapnap nods quietly, settles in for a tongue lashing and hopes that he’ll be able to handle whatever else Quackity says with grace.

“I know.”

“How could you sleep in our bed while you thought we wanted to hurt you?” Quackity demands, whirling on his heels to stare at him. Sapnap can’t meet his eyes but he tries. Quackity’s pupils are dilated, maelstroms of emotion that Sapnap feels unworthy of trying to read at the moment.

“How could you - you comfort me after a nightmare? How could you tell me you loved me? How could you promise me forever, when you thought I was somehow still informing on you? How could you do any of that!?”

“I don’t know.” Sapnap admits. “I don’t...Quackity, I meant it. Every single time I said I loved you. Every time I said it would be okay. Every time I said you were safe. Every single fucking time, I meant it. But I also just...sometimes, I wasn’t sure if *you* meant it.”

“Fuck you.” Quackity spits. “*Fuck* you and *fuck* that. Do you know how hard it was? Do you know how fucking hard it was, leaving Schlatt? Going against him and coming back for you? Do you know how much I ripped myself apart for betraying you? How much I still do? And you - you swore that you’d *keep me* and then we finally start to build a home and suddenly I’m being accused of, of - of still being with him? Of *faking* it?”

“I’m so sorry.” Sapnap covers his face with his hands and then forces himself to drop them. He’s going to face Quackity right now. He’s going to face Quackity head-on and talk about this. He owes him that much.

“You - you think that I want to be scared of him, still?” Quackity turns his back on Sapnap, dragging his beanie off to run a shaky hand through his hair. “Do you think I *want* to miss him? He haunts every fucking thing I do, Sapnap. When I eat, I think of the diets I was always on. When I sleep, I have nightmares. When you or Karl touch my wings, my first thought is always, *always* of those shears. When one of you is on top of me or we - we’re intimate, I feel him until I can see that it’s you. When I breathe, I remember him choking me. When I *blink*, I see his face. He was my *world* for years, Sapnap. I can’t get over it just because he’s gone now. I’m sorry you have to smell it all the time, but I have to fucking *live it*. It was so fucking shitty to throw that in my face. It was fucked up. It was *cruel*.”

“You’re right.” Sapnap wants to reach out. He wants to hold Quackity because he sees the edges of him fraying. He wants to so badly. He keeps his hands clasped tight. He told Quackity he could work this out however he saw fit, and he will.

“I’m never going to be rid of this.” Quackity breathes in shakily, looking down at the beanie in his hands. He twists it, fists clenching. “I’m going to have nightmares. Panic attacks. I’m going to look at you and see him sometimes, and I’ll do it with Karl, and Dream, and even George, too. Sometimes, it won’t even be him I’m freaked out about, it’ll be you guys. I’ve never had anyone like you. Lovers like you and Karl, friends like George and Dream. I don’t know how to *do* these kinds of relationships. You...you just threw that back in my face.”

“I’m sorry.” Sapnap says again, rough, “Q...”

“Sometimes...” Quackity breathes in deep, “Sometimes, I wish that you guys *were* more like Schlatt. I’d know what to do when you got angry. But it didn’t work. I tried, but it just made you angrier. I couldn’t figure out what I was doing wrong, and it scared me. You just yelled *more* when I tried to do what you wanted, and then you got angrier when I tried to calm you down. I’m trying so fucking hard, for both of you, but it was like none of it mattered. I was just the traitor with the book. And that’s my fault. I know that’s my fault, but it hurt. It hurt a lot.”

Sapnap opens his mouth to apologize again but stops himself. What good will another one be? What good will his words do to ease the hurt he’s caused?

“I’m angry.” Quackity turns back around to look at him properly and his eyes are red-rimmed, his nose cherry to match, but he isn’t crying. His lips tremble but he’s obviously trying to stay strong. “I’m angry. I’m hurt. I’m upset with you. I don’t know if you...if you thought it through, when you said you loved me. I thought you meant it, then, but I don’t know now and I hate that. I don’t know if you want *me*, or if - if you just got swept up in it, in Karl and me, in the adventuring and adrenaline. I don’t know. I don’t know how to make you believe me when I say I love you and I want to be here and I don’t want to be with Schlatt or anyone else.”

Sapnap sobs sharply. He wants to shout, but he holds himself back. This is Quackity’s stage. Sapnap is his captive audience until he is released.

Quackity inhales slowly to a familiar count and exhales.

“Okay.” He nods. “Talk.”

“Firstly, I want to tell you I love you and I believe you.” Sapnap stands up, ‘Quackity. I was...I was hurting. My flame was out and I was running on instinct and all my instincts were fucked up from not dealing with my shit, as usual. I was scared and paranoid out of my mind. But none of that, not a single second of it, excuses how I treated you. Any of you, but *especially* you, Q.”

“Why couldn’t you have just talked to us?” Quackity demands, desperation peeking through. “I

know it makes me a fucking hypocrite, I know but -”

“I don’t have an excuse.” Sapnap opens his palms, a plea and an offering and a vulnerability all at once. “I didn’t feel safe. I didn’t feel like I could trust anyone. I was scared. I took it out on you.”

“*Damn it, Sapnap!*” Quackity shouts, pulling at his own hair in frustration, “I know all of that! I know all of that, I did it, *too!* So why am I so fucking *angry!*? I understand, so why -”

“Emotions don’t have to make sense.” Sapnap smiles thinly. “And I deserve it. I broke so many promises to you, Q. I *was* acting like... like him. I yelled at you, both of you. I could have hurt you, if Karl hadn’t stepped in. I keep having these dreams of *being* him. Of hurting you, or letting him hurt you and the others. Every time I woke up, I’d have you two in my arms and I’d *swear* to myself that it would never happen. And I... I let it happen. I broke every promise I made to you. If you hated me, I’d understand. If you never wanted to see me again, I’d understand.”

“Don’t you dare put words in my mouth.” Quackity snaps at him. “I didn’t say any of that.”

“No.” Sapnap sighs. “But I did. It’s true. I almost...I could have...I *would* have...*just* like him, I would have -”

“Stop.” Quackity holds up a hand and Sapnap goes silent. “It...it makes me sick, hearing you comparing yourself to him. You’re nothing like him. Don’t compare yourself to that motherfucker, Sapnap. Don’t.”

“But -”

“Have you ever touched me to hurt me?” Quackity demands and Sapnap blanches.

“No!”

“Have you ever acted like some sort of fucking souteneur and thrown me at random people to use?”

“I don’t even know what that means!”

“Have you ever forced me to do *anything* that I didn’t want to do, Sapnap?”

“I...I hope not.”

“Do you love me?” Quackity stiffens up, crossing his arms tight across his chest, wings drawing in close to his back.

Sapnap looks at him and takes in how battered and tired and upset this man is, and knows that he’ll never love anyone the same way that he loves him.

“More than anything.” He says and hopes that the sincerity is as apparent to Quackity as it feels coming from his voice.

“Then you’re nothing like him.” Quackity sniffs, just once. “And I know you were yelling at me, but I shouldn’t have said you were acting like him. I’m sorry I did that. It wasn’t fair to you.”

“It wasn’t fair to you, either, what I did.”

“Okay.” Quackity shrugs stiffly. “Then we won’t do those things again.”

“I just want...” Sapnap feels his temperature starting to fluctuate, rising rapidly and cooling just as

fast, “I just want to give you an out. I hurt you, Quackity. I lied to you, and I was cruel to you. You were right about everything you said. If you can’t...if you can’t be with me after this, I understand, and I just want to give you the chance to -”

“I don’t want your stupid chance or an *out*.” Quackity stares at him, eyes guarded. “I just want you. And Karl, and this life. I want to know that you mean it when you say you love me and that you trust me. I don’t want you to leave me behind.”

“Never.” Sapnap says immediately. “Never, ever. I love you. I trust you. I’m working on that last part, but that is *not* your fault. It’s mine. It’s work I’m doing on myself, and I know that it’s such a dick thing to ask of you, to be patient while I do it but obviously I’m an asshole, so I’ll ask it.”

“...do you know how crazy I’ve been going?” Quackity rubs his face. “How much I’ve missed you? All you had to do was *ask*. Yes, *idiot*, I can be fucking patient for you if you can be for me.”

Sapnap blinks, dropping back to the bench, dizzy with relief. “I missed you, too. I missed you so much, angel.”

“Now apologize for trying to make me break up with you.”

“I’m sorry.” Sapnap says immediately, “I’m sorry for that. And I’m sorry for scaring you. Now and every time I’ve ever scared you.”

“I forgive you for the first part.” Quackity comes closer, a cautious bird flitting closer to check out what may be a trap but is too tempting to resist. “But I don’t need to forgive you for the second. I’ve never been scared of you, Sapnap.”

Sapnap’s head jerks up, gaping at the absolute sincerity on Quackity’s face.

“Even when you were shouting, I wasn’t scared of you. I was scared of the person it made me think of. Even when I thought you might leave me for delaying you during the coup, I wasn’t scared of *you*, I was scared you’d *leave*. I’ve never been scared of *you*, Sap. You... Karl might have been the first to *see me*, to see what I was going through and actually try and help me, but you, Sapnap, you were the first person that made me feel *safe*. You’re still the person that makes me feel the safest. I never thought I’d ever have anything like that.”

Quackity drops to his knees in front of Sapnap and Sapnap stares at him, shocked. When Quackity carefully reaches out and holds his hands, Sapnap lets him. Quackity lifts one of Sapnap’s hands to his cheek and Sapnap allows the handling easily, lets himself cup Quackity’s cool cheek in his palm.

Quackity breathes out, slow and steady, turning his face into Sapnap’s hand so that his lips touch his palm. “I’m fucking furious at you. For letting it get so bad. For not telling us. But then I guess that makes us even.”

“I didn’t understand.” Sapnap says quietly, watching with awe as Quackity holds Sapnap’s hand to his own face, sits on his knees in front of him despite what he’s done. “What happened in the forest, you tried to explain but I didn’t understand it at the time. I think I understand now. It was easier, and felt safer, for me to fall back into constantly being on guard. Distrusting everyone, expecting an attack, pushing everyone away so no one could hurt me again.”

“It was not your fault, what happened back then.” Quackity flutters his pretty eyes closed and Sapnap traces his scar, follows it over his eye and feels how Quackity relaxes under his touch. It could bring him to tears. It does. The trust and love Quackity is showing with such a simple show

of devotion.

"It's not your fault, what happened in the kitchen." Sapnap replies and brushes the tear that beads in the corner of Quackity's eye.

Quackity hums against his hand, nose brushing his wrist. "I think..." he trails off. "I think, if...if you want to, we can work through this. Loving you both is hard for me, Sap. So, so hard. Not because of you, but because I don't know what I'm doing most of the time. Being with Schlatt was easy. It hurt more, but the rules were clear. This love is messier and the rules seem like they just change as time goes on, but it *heals*. It's worth it. You're both worth it to me."

"You sound like Karl."

"What can I say?" Quackity smiles a little, shy, "He's rubbed off on me, and not only in the fun way."

"Quackity!" Sapnap barks a surprised laugh, which makes Quackity smile wider. It's a radiant smile. Sapnap wants to see it every day for the rest of his life.

"I want to." Sapnap says when the quiet has fallen around them after the brief respite of tension. "Work through it, I mean."

Quackity nods once, breathing slow and deep with Sapnap's hand on his face. Sapnap should pull him to the bench, ask him to sit. But this is - he doesn't know why, but it feels intimate and he craves that with Quackity so deeply that he'd do anything to stay just like this for a second longer. A minute more. An hour of time just between them.

He allows himself only a few minutes, time to paint the picture Quackity makes in his mind so he can keep it forever. And then he gently brushes his fingers to Quackity's elbow.

"Join me?" He asks, soft, and Quackity nods again. He allows Sapnap to help him up and to the bench, where much less space is left between them. Sapnap offers his hand again and this time, Quackity takes it. Slow, at his own pace, but their palms slide together, fingers tangle.

Sapnap takes a deep breath. He feels lightheaded with relief but he still has to tell Quackity. He didn't say the words to Karl, but he knows Karl understood without them. Quackity deserves words, after how badly Sapnap has fucked up with not saying them to him.

"Skeppy and Bad," He starts, "They'll stay for a while but... but they won't be here forever. And they've offered that I go with them. Just for a little bit. Until I'm more recovered and I've worked out the shit I've been feeling about what happened before."

Quackity stills. Every part of him freezes as he takes in Sapnap's words.

"On your own." He says, eventually. It isn't a question.

"This is our home." Sapnap says instead, "I'll come back, if I go. I promised you I'd never leave and it's a promise I'm *going* to keep."

"How can we fix us, if you're not here?" Quackity asks, but it isn't accusing. Just a question, as calm as Sapnap could hope for him to be.

"I don't know *how* to fix us. I don't know whether I want to go or not. I don't have a recipe to make everything that happened before we came here okay. I don't know whether I'll ever stop being fucked up about it, even if I did leave." Sapnap takes a deep breath, "But I know three things

for sure.”

“Yeah?” Quackity says, looking at Sapnap with a scrunch to his eyebrows that Sapnap shouldn’t find adorable but does.

“I love you,” Sapnap exhales, shaky and relieved at how freeing it is to say every single time, this bubbling, broken truth in his chest, “I love you and Karl so much it terrifies me, what I would do for you. And I don’t think I’ll ever stop loving you. If something happened, and I forgot, like George, I would still love you. I love you both, and I’ll never, ever stop. That’s what I know.”

Quackity takes a moment, and when he speaks, his voice is *wrecked*, “I love you, too. Karl loves you. We’ll never leave you, not if you don’t want us to. We can wait for you.”

There is a pause as Quackity wipes at his eyes with a hand that isn’t resting on the stone of the bench between them.

“You only said two,” He asks, in the end, “What was the third thing?”

Sapnap smiles at him, adoring and watery, “You already said it, angel.”

“Oh,” Quackity says, and that is enough to set him off again, “*Oh.*”

Karl finds them almost an hour later, cried out and resting against each other on the bench, Quackity’s head on Sapnap’s shoulder as he talks about small things Sapnap has missed in his convalescence. The baker’s son got engaged and left the village. In an unsurprising turn of events, the baker and the cobbler immediately hooked up as soon as her son was out of town. There’s a wheat shortage for the next two months due to a blockage along the roads to the capital. None of it is important, and yet Sapnap wants to hear every benign bit if it’s Quackity’s voice recounting the stories to him.

“My two favorite boys.” Karl says by way of announcing his presence. It’s more lowkey than usual for him, but Sapnap welcomes the quiet introduction to the little bubble of calm he and Quackity have created together.

“Our favorite boy.” Sapnap quirks a smile as Quackity sits up, face brightening.

“Hi, Karl.” Quackity greets him with the sort of look one might give a lover returning from war, besotted and relieved.

Karl presses a hand to his heart, knees faltering dramatically despite still being yards from them.

“Ah, angel,” He sighs, “My beloved, my sweetest song, please. But only that look, and my soul is yours, once again.”

“Stop.” Quackity groans, “For fuck’s sake, Karl.”

“A voice like a prayer kissing my name as your voice does,” Karl continues as he staggers to them, drops to the ground in a pile of flair and pomp, “Command me, my muse, and I will do your bidding. Cast me to hell, and I shall gladly rake the coals to level the ground you cross with my very bones. Ascend me to the heavens, and I would shine each step with my own eternity in preparation for your following. Keep me earth-bound and I will happily lay at your heels as the most loyal of mutts do until my body is naught but dust, and even then it will be I that is kicked up at your feet as you tread the earth.”

“You make me want to throw up.” Quackity scowls, face bright red.

“I think I did, a little.” Sapnap agrees, unable to keep from giggling at the theatrics.

Karl laughs, loud and happy. He asks for a hand without a word and Sapnap gives it to him, blushes when Karl lays a kiss to each knuckle.

“My knight.” Karl drops his voice. “My hero, my dearest heart. The light in my darkest hour, the sliver of bravery in my most cowardly moment.”

“Can’t you just say you love us like a normal person?” Sapnap asks but he knows that the quiver in his voice gives him away. “Fuck, Karl.”

“I could.” Karl blinks up at them both, dazzling with how bright he glows. “I love you. I love you, I love you. The word pales in comparison to the feeling it’s meant to capture, but it’s the best that the prison of linguistics has to offer me and so I will take it. I love you both.”

“Someone’s happy.” Quackity pinches Karl’s cheek, “Or he’s misused some potion ingredients and is not as sober as one would hope.”

“High only on love, baby.” Karl lets himself be pinched, smiles wide and pluses his cheeks up perfectly for pinching. “Seeing you two together again, outside...I’m happy, that’s all. I missed you both so much.”

“I missed you,” Sapnap agrees quietly, looking between them. “I’m -”

“No more apologies.” Quackity stops him. “From now on, I don’t want to hear that word again. If you want to say sorry, just - just kiss me, instead.”

“Me, too?” Karl says hopefully.

“Sorrys or kisses?”

“Both?”

Quackity laughs, bright and warm, like his voice is going on a light flight. “Okay. No apologies from you, either.”

“Or from you.” Sapnap adds on. “No more sorrys.”

“Just kisses.” Karl taps his lips, “Which I deserve, because I wasn’t told about the baker’s son and that is a travesty.”

Quackity giggles again, leaning down to drop a light kiss to Karl’s pursed lips.

“And,” Karl looks firmly at Sapnap, “I deserve one because no one told me you’d be leaving your room today and I wanted to be with you when you came outside again.”

Sapnap carefully leans down and presses a slow, happy kiss to Karl’s awaiting lips.

“Thank you.” Karl looks between them, “Now I’m sure there’s something that’s been said which required a kiss between you.”

“Voyeur.” Quackity laughs and Sapnap takes the opportunity to lean down and press a gentle, hummingbird-quick kiss to the corner of Quackity’s lips.

“Oh.” Quackity says, the laughter trailing off. He looks away from Karl to Sapnap, thoughtful for a long few seconds before he shakes his head. “Not good enough. I deserve a proper one.”

“A proper one?” Sapnap smiles. “What would that look like?”

Quackity taps the middle of his lips. “Right here, hotstuff. Smack one on me.”

“Yeah, lay one on him!”

Sapnap laughs at them both and leans down again. He kisses Quackity properly this time and Quackity kisses back. Soon, he has hands in his hair, dragging him closer, and he holds onto Quackity’s sides with intention. When Karl sits on the bench at Sapnap’s other side, Sapnap reaches out blindly until he finds Karl’s hand and can tug him close to his back, too. Soon, the three of them are squished tight on the bench, still space enough for perhaps another body or two left for how closely they all sit together.

The lemon tree sways gently in the wind above them.

George can admit that he isn’t the best cook, but when Skeppy says “George, help me with dinner,” he doesn’t argue.

“You’re sure you want *George’s* help?” Dream tries, but it’s too late. George has been chosen.

“Dream, go help Bad clean up the dining room. I can’t believe you guys have had a whole mansion for months and you haven’t even taken the dust covers off most of the furniture.”

“We didn’t think we needed all the room,” George explains as he follows Skeppy into the kitchen. He and Dream had hunted all morning in preparation for this dinner, the first time all of them would be in one room and the last dinner Bad and Skeppy would have before leaving. They’d brought back a wild sheep, which Dream had slung across his shoulders to carry because George had refused to help just to see what he’d do, and a string of rabbits that had fallen victim to their traps. George had skinned the sheep and rabbits while Dream harvested vegetables from their garden with Karl’s help and then he and Quackity had done most of the butchering under Skeppy’s watchful eye. Neither of them were particularly adept at it, but Quackity was trying to impress Sapnap’s parents and George had an innate fear of being assigned laundry, and so they butchered the sheep to Skeppy’s precise specifications.

Now, the meat is waiting alongside other ingredients for Skeppy and his chosen assistant, George, to make a meal of it.

The meal, as it turns out, is relatively simple. Skeppy roasts the meats while George peels the potatoes and carrots, chops them all up and arranges them for roasting, too, seasoned with herbs from Quackity’s garden. There’s fresh bread that pops out of the oven just in time for the veggies to go in.

Working in the kitchen, making food with Skeppy, eases something in George that has been poking at him for a long time. When Skeppy brushes past him, already expecting certain tasks to be completed, George lets himself be proud when they are. It’s like he’s proving to both Skeppy and himself that he’s self-sufficient, that he can take care of this place and these people despite what’s going on. He hunted today. He skinned and butchered the meat. He cleaned and peeled and chopped the vegetables from the garden he’s been helping to maintain.

George has built a nice life here. He isn’t just some spoiled prince anymore, barely allowed to scuff his knees without someone there to fuss at him for it. It feels really good to show that to Skeppy, the closest thing to a parent he has left. He wonders, as he slides the sheet of vegetables into the oven, if his mom and dad would be proud of him even without the throne or crown. He doesn’t

think of them often, it's a sort of empty pain that he knows will never be filled, but Skeppy pats him on the shoulder when the oven door is closed and George thinks that they would be.

They finish up transferring everything to serving platters around the time that Karl and Quackity and Sapnap come back from their visit to the village for the weekly groceries. What is usually a few hours' trip took nearly the whole afternoon. George doesn't doubt that Sapnap tried to walk most of it despite having dropped what seems like half his weight and being bed-ridden for nearly a month. He can imagine the both of them pleading with him to just ride on the wagon instead of leading Patches like he normally would, and Sapnap stubbornly limping and then crawling and then squirming down the road before Quackity no doubt forced him to sit down and rest.

But, long trip or no, they're back in time for dinner and that's the most important thing.

The dining room looks nice, when George walks in carrying the mutton on a platter. The windows are open wide to let in the crisp, fresh air; there is not a speck of dust in sight except for what George sees sprinkling Dream's clothes and hair and the bridge of his nose, and the dust covers of the table and chairs and cabinets have all been removed and stored somewhere. The table has been freshly scrubbed, even, and placemats are in front of each chair - just enough for all of them without a spare in sight despite George distinctly remembering there being at least ten to this particular table and chair set.

"Can I help?" Dream asks, hands lifting awkwardly as he stands from his place, but George shakes his head and sets the mutton down delicately.

"We have it, thanks,"

"Sorry, I should have gone to check." Dream wipes at his face with his sleeve and George can't help the rising fondness as he comes around the table and uses his own sleeve to scrub the dust off Dream's face.

"You're right, that was sort of evil of you, making me carry things. Don't do it again." he says, ruffling through Dream's hair to get the dust out of the dirty blond.

"Yes, George." Dream smiles and it could blind George, the way the sunshine practically seeps from him.

"Gag," Sapnap says loudly and George realizes that he's been sitting at the table the entire time. Whoops.

"Why didn't *you* offer to help, hmm?" George pats Dream's shoulders and takes a step back, now aware that they're being watched. It's only Sapnap, so he doesn't step that far back, but still. They're in the dining room.

"I wanted to see if your stick-like, little arms would be able to handle it." Sapnap shrugs. "Good job, you lifted dinner."

"I *shot* dinner, I'll have you know!" George rolls his eyes at him, "And I skinned and butchered it myself. You best be careful, or I'll come after you with the knife next time."

Something tells George he shouldn't be making those kinds of jokes directly after Sapnap has just recovered from an intense period of paranoia but also fuck it, George would have said that to him this time last year, too, and he won't treat Sapnap with any sort of gloves.

Sapnap laughs, loud and shocked. "That's fucked up, George."

“*That’s fucked up, George,*” George mocks just as Quackity comes in carrying the platters of vegetables, the bread balanced precariously in the crux of his elbow.

“Can we stop fighting for, like, five minutes?” Quackity demands, “We’re having *dinner.*”

“We aren’t fighting,” Sapnap stands up, striding over to pull the bread from Quackity’s arms. He’s moving stiffly, George can see the tiredness that weighs him down, but George is sure it is purely physical. Sapnap looks unlike himself right now, nearly as thin as George is, little of his bulk left. George is sure that he could probably lift Sapnap, if Sapnap would ever let him. This meal is going to be the first of many high in meats and carbs; George is going to fatten Sapnap up like a sacrificial cow, if he has anything to say about it. Dream’s been working on a training plan when he thinks George is sleeping, ever since Sapnap woke up. Within a few months, George thinks that Sapnap will be good as new.

“And we aren’t having dinner yet, angel,” Karl glides into the room, a pitcher of water and a bottle of wine in hand, “Relax.”

“Relax, he says,” Quackity mutters, “Like he’s *relaxed.*”

“I *am* relaxed,” Karl says, obviously not relaxed. He’s got his best clothes on and his curls are tamed down, despite Dream still wearing the same clothes they’d hunted in and George smelling of garden soil. It seems like Quackity couldn’t decide if he wanted to match Karl’s level of formality or theirs, because he’s wearing a pressed shirt but his hair is as wild as usual, his beanie plastered on top.

“Guys, it’s just dinner.” Sapnap tries to soothe but George is in the mood to cause trouble.

“Dinner with your *parents*, Sapnap.” He says, “The first time we’re all gonna be together, ever! You guys must be nervous as hell.”

“George!”

“We aren’t!”

“Yeah, we’ve met his parents before, this is fine, this is all fine, we’re all fine,”

Dream laughs, wheezy and bright, and George has to stomp down on the urge to smile as he watches Karl and Quackity run around like headless chickens and Sapnap try to calm them as he shoots dirty glowers George’s way.

In the end, the table is set once Bad joins them, plates stacked in one hand and a tray of crystal glasses George hadn’t even known they own in the other.

“You guys really have been using about four rooms altogether in this entire mansion, haven’t you?” Bad says with gentle amusement, “You hadn’t even unlocked the nice dishes.”

“We each have our own room,” Sapnap sniffs, “That’s five on its own.”

“Those don’t count,” Bad laughs, “I can tell that you guys have only been using two of them.”

“We don’t need a big place.” Dream shrugs, “We’re used to it being small now.”

“Not as small as the tent, mind you,” George butts in, “Two rooms are good.”

“Not that we don’t appreciate the mansion.” Karl says wryly, “Excuse the spoiled royalty in the

room, but I like the giant house.”

“Then explore it more, mister,” Bad points at Karl playfully, “There are secrets in this house. Like this,” he motions to a slight warp to the tabletop, “Sapnap did this when he was young. Got so excited about something that he just slapped the tabletop and burnt it right up. We tried sanding and painting over it but it went too deep.”

“Daaaaad,” Sapnap groans and Quackity giggles into his hands, nervously squirming in his seat between Sapnap and Karl. George kicks him under the table, just hard enough to make him jolt, and smiles when Quackity glares at him across the table.

Skeppy joins them with utensils in hand as Dream and Karl start to argue about the utility of the mansion. George doesn’t care either way. He’s lived his entire life in a castle so big he couldn’t attempt to remember every room but he also spent nearly six months sleeping in a tent just big enough for two camper beds. This estate seems a good middle ground to him; he knows that they’re lucky that Bad and Skeppy want to watch out for them and have given them such a perfect escape house, and he’s happy here. Whether they use one room or all of them, it doesn’t matter to George. Still, he allows the others to battle it out because they need the entertainment.

The feud ends when Skeppy finishes handing out the silverware and takes his place at one end of the table, Bad at the other after he’s filled everyone’s wine glasses. George and Dream sit next to each other on Bad’s right, their backs to the large window that overlooks the eastern orchard. Sapnap, Quackity, and Karl sit on Bad’s left, Quackity determinedly staring over George’s shoulder to hide his nerves.

“Well.” Skeppy grins, “It took us a few weeks to get here, but we’re finally having a nice, family dinner.”

“Is this...the first time we’ve all been in the same room?” George looks around the table. “The whole family’s here.”

“Almost.” Dream says under his breath and George reaches out to grab his hand under the table. George doesn’t need to ask to know he’s thinking of Puffy.

“Except for Puffy.” Sapnap says out loud and nods when Dream looks at him with a smile. “And we’ll get her, too, one day.”

“And we have two new members with us.” Bad lifts his glass, a sip of wine darkening the crystal at the base. “Quackity, Karl. It’s so nice to finally speak to you without an emergency going on in the background.”

“Yeah,” Quackity smiles, looking similar to someone having a last meal.

“I mean that.” Bad says seriously, “I look forward to getting to know you better. You two did, and continue to do a lot for our boy and I won’t ever forget it.”

“We -” Quackity starts but George sees Sapnap’s arm shift and imagines that, much as he holds Dream’s hand, Sapnap is holding Quackity’s. Quackity stops, swallows. “I look forward to getting to know you both, too. You’re important to Sapnap so...”

“He’s done more for us than we can say. Facing the parents is the least we can do.” Karl chimes in and Sapnap goes pink. There’s a muffled *thump* under the table. Karl’s charming expression doesn’t change but George is sure that he’s just had his toes broken.

“Stop harassing your boyfriends, Sapnap.” Skeppy frowns at him and Sapnap scowls.

"Fiances." Karl corrects, which just makes Sapnap groan.

"You have not proposed, Karl. We are not fiances, yet."

"Sapnap, Quackity, will you -"

"Don't you dare propose right now, Karl Jacobs," Quackity cuts him off and Karl subsides with a pout. It makes George laugh sharply, which sets Dream off next to him, and Sapnap is rarely far behind wherever Dream goes.

Quackity still looks like he's on trial, but his shoulders ease a little bit as they all cackle, Skeppy grinning and Bad casually sipping at his wine.

"Quackity," George hears Skeppy say beneath their giggles. "You should carve the lamb, I think."

Quackity nods meekly, as if Skeppy has just asked him to pull out his own fingernails, and reaches for the carving knife and fork.

When Dream takes over the carving for Quackity, Skeppy still insists on taking one of the uneven slabs Quackity had cut. Karl lathers on praise for the food while completely ignoring that George had anything to do with it, and Skeppy soaks in the purple prose bullshit Karl likes to spout. Bad is heavy-handed with the wine every time he gets up to refill cups, except for Sapnap, who has been ordered to drink some sort of blaze powder smoothie between glasses of water. George has a suspicion that Karl is calculating his drinking so he always has an empty glass when Bad refills to be polite, until George sees that Karl isn't touching the glass at all. Instead, Sapnap is tag-teaming with Quackity to steal sips when Karl is looking the other way. At one point, he sees them both go for it at once while Karl is talking to Dream and blush like school children when their fingers brush. Quackity ends up sipping first before handing it off to Sapnap and then quickly returning it.

George sits back with a full belly and a face warm from smiling and wine, Dream's hand tight in his under the table, to watch. He knows that Bad and Skeppy will put Quackity at ease as dinner goes on. There will be more laughter, and stories. George has been saving some of his favorite childhood memories of Sapnap embarrassing himself just for a moment like this, when he has plenty of back-ups. He'll get stories about himself in revenge, and Dream will try to top them both until they gang up on him. Maybe Quackity will have a story he wants to tell, or Karl will share one of his adventures or tales. Either way, George knows the night will be long and good, and well deserved.

"Okay?" Dream leans in to whisper while Bad and Skeppy loudly bicker across the table and the three nimrods across from him turn back and forth like they're watching a ball game.

"I'm perfect." George says happily.

"You are." Dream laughs, wine on his breath and staining his cheeks pink. It's cute. George can only barely resist the urge to pinch.

"Don't start something we can't finish at the dinner table, Dream." George says in a whisper and Dream's eyes go big and bright.

"Oh?" His lips stretch into a wide, mischievous grin, one of George's favorite expressions. He hasn't seen it in over a month now and it's good to see. It was almost too much, having both of his boys not themselves.

Sometimes, when missing XD feels a little overwhelming, George goes to find Dream just to see a smile like this. It reminds him why he gave it all up, and exactly how *worth it* it all was. George

would do it all again, if he had to, just for that smile.

"Yes, oh." George says primly and pretends to go back to listening in on the budding feud between Sapnap's parents. Quackity is stuck in the middle with Karl taking Skeppy's side and Sapnap taking Bad's. Quackity sends George a helpless sort of smile-grimace thing that sets George off again. Dream leans his forehead on George's shoulder, no doubt the wine's influence, the lightweight.

"Stop being gross at the table." Sapnap complains, "Dad, tell them!"

"We aren't being gross, idiot, Dream is about to pass out from your dad getting him drunk!"

"I'm not drunk!" Dream sits up, voice sleepy, and that makes even Quackity laugh. It's his real one, loud and squawky, and he doesn't even try to muffle it.

"Okay, no more wine for him," Bad carefully moves Dream's glass away. Karl casually picks it up and pours it into his own but Quackity finishes the whole glass when Karl turns to Bad.

"I think no more wine for me, either." Karl says when he sees the empty glass, tossing Quackity an amused glance.

"More for us." Skeppy nudges George, winking when George nudges him back.

George is right in his predictions. Dinner lasts for hours. The seven of them pick the lamb clean and George catches Quackity slipping Sapnap bits of meat and veggies when Sapnap isn't paying attention, who just shrugs and eats the bits when he sees them. They move to the sitting room when the food is all gone and the bottle they shared is empty. George hadn't realized how small the room was until all of them were set in it, cozy and warm in front of the fire.

Bad and Skeppy end up on the love seat, George settled against the arm of the couch with Dream splayed out with his head in George's lap. Sapnap settles in front of the fire and Karl joins him there, draping an arm across his shoulders that Sapnap leans into. Quackity sits close by, not quite touching but still within reach of them both.

As the night winds down, George just sits and listens. Dream and Quackity get into a casual discussion on cats that trails toward a direction George knows will lead to some new mouths to feed around the place soon. Bad and Karl exchange anecdotes of their travels. Skeppy and Sapnap talk of Pandora and the Badlands, the seasons and how they compare to twenty years ago. Skeppy asks Quackity about his gardens and he lights up, Dream asks after Kinoko and Bad gives them a brief, optimistic summary of the new government and how things seem to be going. Wilbur regularly asks after them all, which gets a chorus of *ooooooohs* directed at Quackity that have him cursing them out right there in front of Skeppy and Bad despite Bad's choked out "*Language!*" through his laughter. Skeppy catches George up on the latest court gossip, despite there not being much of a court left.

It's maybe the best night that George has ever had, barring the first night he got to hold Dream again after losing him.

It is deep into the night when Dream finally loses his battle with the wine and falls asleep in George's lap, George's fingers aimlessly stroking his hair. George can't help but watch his face fondly, tracing his features, listening to his slow breathing, appreciating the signs of life. When he looks up, he sees that Sapnap has been doing the same thing and George, as always, feels a kinship with Sapnap unique to the two of them.

"I think it's time for us to go to bed." He says in the next gentle lull of conversation, "He'll

complain for the next year if I let him sleep on the couch."

"You mean that *you'll* complain for a year if you sleep on the couch and he has you pinned." Quackity teases and George shoots him a middle finger as he shakes Dream awake.

"Hm?" Dream hums, blinking hazily up at him. George knows when he realizes who is waking him up because he smiles, slow and dopey. "Hi, George."

"Hi, Dream." George doesn't soften his voice on purpose. It's only that it is late and his voice is tired. "Bed."

"M'kay." Dream mumbles and sits up without complaint. "Oh, you guys are still here?"

"We are," Karl huffs a laugh, "Thank you for noticing."

"Goodnight, everybody." George stands, taking Dream's wrist and leading him on sleepy legs to the doorway, "We'll see you in the morning."

"Goodnight, boys." Bad says fondly, the warmth apparent enough that it makes George flush. Even after all this time, he still doesn't know what to do with the sort of paternal affection that tends to radiate from both Bad and Skeppy.

"Goodnight." Dream waves and then follows George closely, crowding against his back as soon as they're out of sight. George sighs and ends up stiffly marching to their room, Dream practically dead weight on his back, stepping only as much as he needs to to stay plastered to George.

"You're an idiot, Dream." He huffs, only a little bit amused, when he finally gets them to their door, "Just walk."

"Don't wanna." Dream says, arms tightening around George's waist. "I'll sleep like this."

"I sure the hell won't." George grumbles and forces Dream to at least come into the room.

Getting them both undressed is a struggle because Dream refuses to unlatch himself for more than a few seconds at a time. George makes do, because he was raised by a damn Queen, and at least gets them both mostly undressed before he crawls into bed with Dream close behind.

As he always does, even without the alcohol, Dream curls up onto his side, clinging to George like an octopus. He's got his mouth slightly open, face tinged pink, and in that moment he looks so utterly human that it breaks George's heart.

Somehow, through a combination of the ache in his heart and the fact he's a little tipsy, the words just slip out.

"I love you."

Dream hums, deep and low in his chest. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing." George frowns down at him. "I just...I love you. I want you to know that."

"I do know that." Dream runs his nose, cold from the hallway walk, against George's skin. "You know I know that. What's wrong?"

George bites his lip. He settles a hand in Dream's hair, appreciates that he *can*.

"I miss XD sometimes."

Regret stiffens his limbs almost immediately and his heart speeds up. For a brief moment, he can't tell if it's the words or George's own reaction to them that Dream is reacting to, blinking open his eyes with a confused furrow to his brow. He wants to take it back, keep the night warm and happy, but he meets Dream's eyes and knows it's too late.

"I mean," George starts, "I - Dream, I -"

He stops when Dream simply puts a hand over his mouth, stopping the words midflow.

"It's alright," Dream says, his voice dragging from a combination of sleepiness and wine, "Shh, Georgie, it's alright."

"It's not," George dislodges Dream's hand, holding it tightly, "It's not, I miss him, when I have *you* -"

"It's okay," Dream says, with the kind of sincerity that only tipsy people have, "I know."

George's mouth drops open. "What?"

"It's all -" Dream's hands fly about with abandon, describing something indescribable, "-messy. 'S okay. You love me. That's enough."

George is definitely blaming the alcohol for the tears in his eyes, "Dream..."

"Hush," Dream says, clumsily wiping George's face, and pulling him closer to his chest, "It's okay. Tonight is happy. I'm happy. I love you. You love me. Sleep."

George closes his eyes. The cat is out of the bag; he knows they'll talk about it more when they're sober. But it doesn't feel as enormous as it once was; a stone, rather than a boulder on his back.

He loves Dream. He misses XD, but he *loves* Dream. That's enough.

Deliberately, Sapnap hadn't had much to drink. His dads banned it, but he was an adult, and if they saw him, they didn't kick up a fuss. He wanted the warmth that came from good wine and better conversation, but none of the effects come morning.

He needs to make a decision, after all.

There's also a part of him - a part that he doesn't think will ever go away, but maybe will become easier to manage - that doesn't want to get drunk because it's too close to how Quackity smells when he is afraid. Alcohol is forever linked to a past Sapnap doesn't want to remind Quackity of and he had already decided he wanted to sleep in their room tonight. He'd only started after he saw Quackity had done the same, and there had been the briefest moment of skin to skin as their hands both brushed against the glass and he felt like an understanding had been reached when Quackity had started passing him the glass to drink from, too.

Either way, the bottle between the seven of them had only been enough to take Dream out. Sapnap isn't even tipsy, and neither is Karl, though Quackity surely had more than his fair share. Quackity has the slightest shade of pink on his cheeks, but Sapnap noticed that Karl hadn't touched a drop the whole night and is clear-eyed in front of the fire with him.

"I think it's time your father and I retire for the night." Bad says, only a few minutes after George totes their half-sleeping friend away. "We have an early afternoon."

"Yeah," Skeppy stands, stretching, "Gotta sleep off all that food." He rubs his belly with an exaggerated groan, "I ate half that sheep, I think."

"And I ate the other half." Bad laughs, a casual hand going to Skeppy's back. Sapnap can't help but watch, appreciate that he has them. He'd missed them so much and having them around again has felt freeing. He would have loved this even if they hadn't come just in time to save his life. Getting to introduce them properly to Karl and Quackity, them getting to know his chosen partners and spending time with George and Dream again...it's been good. For his health and for his heart.

"We bid you all adieu." Skeppy bows with exaggerated grace and Karl bows back as best he can while on the ground.

"Fare thee well, future in-laws." Karl bids right back and it has Bad laughing all the way out of the room.

"You can't keep calling them that." Sapnap says when he is sure they're out of hearing range and he is free of Skeppy's harping. "I want a rock on this finger before you start telling people about the wedding."

"*I tried* but Quackity said no!"

"I said you couldn't propose in the middle of dinner." Quackity corrects, finally crawling closer. He'd been so careful to keep an innocent distance all night and Sapnap had wanted to respect his boundaries. Now, though, they're alone and Sapnap would like to hold his boys.

He reaches without words and Quackity keeps crawling, right into his arms.

"I think that's a fair rule," Sapnap leans back against Karl's chest, Quackity settling into his lap. His wings are free and loose, finally allowed to relax from where he's had them rigidly folded against his back all night, and Sapnap recognizes the body language. When his fingers brush the top arches, Quackity sighs and relaxes.

"First of all, it's a bullshit rule. Let me propose to you!"

"Give it a year." Sapnap says with a smile that he tries to hide in Quackity's hair. "Make it a year, at least, and then you can propose."

"Six months."

"Nine months." Quackity counters. "Who knows, what if you run into two cuter people in the village?"

"Impossible." Karl scoffs. "You two are the cutest people in the entire world. Besides, what do I care if I run into other people?" Karl leans down and pecks Quackity on the lips, pointed, "I love you two. My heart is yours and will beat only for you for the rest of my days. Let me marry you so that I can tie my physical body to yours the same way that my soul has been tethered."

"Does it ever get difficult, sounding like you're in a pulp romance novel?" Quackity asks but his voice is soft and he leans up to kiss Karl almost before the words are out.

"Not really." Karl says, a musical lilt to his voice that gives away just how happy he is right now. In his happiest moments, he's sing-songed entire sentences at them and Sapnap can hear how close he is to simply serenading them both. It makes Sapnap feel impossibly warm. He can feel his flame flickering and swelling with it, how full of food and happiness he feels sitting between them again.

“A year.” Sapnap returns to the discussion at hand, tilting to look at Karl with a smile. “And then you can propose. I might say yes, even.”

“I won’t.” Quackity chimes in, like a liar.

“Fine,” Karl complains, “If I *have* to wait, okay. I can wait a few more months. It’ll give me time to plan a good one.”

“I want flowers.” Sapnap jokes and then remembers who he’s talking to and fears that he will somehow drown in petals when the day arrives.

“I can do flowers.” Karl laughs, “Any other requests? Angel?”

“No,” Quackity leans his head on Sapnap’s shoulder, shrugging, “I don’t need anything. Just you two.”

“That’s a given.” Karl settles a hand on Quackity’s knee, his other arm still curled around Sapnap’s back, “I need you both there to say yes.”

Sapnap lets the conversation die gently, closes his eyes and basks in the warmth of the fire and how nice Quackity feels in his arms and how solid Karl is at his side and back. He can feel both of them breathing, their chests rising and falling against him, and he can hear the quiet fluttering of Quackity’s wings as he gets comfortable and their natural twitchiness starts to emerge, the humming tune that dips in and out of Karl as his fingers paint little patterns on both of them - seen on Quackity’s thigh and felt on Sapnap’s back.

He could sleep right here, full of good food and better company, surrounded by people he loves. He has a feeling the wine is going to catch up with Quackity soon; though he may not be tipsy anymore, Sapnap knows that Badlands wine can be a heavy sedative, especially if it’s a new experience.

“D’you think we passed?” Karl asks thoughtfully, sometime later. Quackity isn’t asleep but Sapnap feels the way Karl’s voice makes him startle.

“Passed what?”

“With your parents.” Karl leans his head on Sapnap’s, “Do you think they liked us?”

“Yeah,” Sapnap doesn’t even hesitate. “They loved you. I knew they would.”

“Even after everything?” Quackity blinks up at him, the fire casting harsh shadows on his face. Sapnap wants to smooth the worry lines from his forehead and the only way he can think to do it is with kisses. It seems to work, Quackity’s face smoothing out into something more relaxed again. Sapnap uses the time to formulate a response.

“I think,” He settles on saying, arms tightening around Quackity as he does. “That they know that life is more complicated than most love stories would have you believe. They know you love me. You showed them that. You...you showed *me* that, even when I thought the whole world wanted to do nothing but hurt me.”

“Sap...” Karl touches his forehead to Sapnap’s temple. Sapnap can feel his eyelashes when he blinks and he breathes in slowly, just *feels* how surrounded he is and appreciates the security, the safety. It’s like those first few times they slept together in the tent, crowded underneath them, holding on for dear life all night just so they wouldn’t fall. Hearing their heartbeats and their breathing as they slept. Feeling, for the first time since Dream had disappeared, like he wasn’t all

alone in the dark. He'd missed that feeling and this is just like it, except *more*. Except bigger. Because he'd thought he'd loved them then, when they were traveling and every minute they lived was a gift they'd stolen from someone else, and he *had*; but if that was love, then he doesn't have words for what he feels for them now. Karl had said it in the garden days ago and it rang in Sapnap's mind like bells ever sense; the word pales but it's all he has and so he uses it. He hopes that they know how deeply, painfully he cares for them.

He wishes he could show them.

He feels his inner flame shift, warming him from his core and radiating the heat outward. Sapnap carefully presses a hand to his chest. He's a fire demon. He *can* show them.

"What's wrong?" Quackity asks as soon as he notices the hand Sapnap has over his heart, "Is it your flame? Do you need Bad? Blaze powder?"

"No," Sapnap smiles, "I'm okay. I'm great, actually. I want to show you both something."

"Okay." Karl says simply. "What is it?"

Sapnap hesitates. Would it scare them? Weird them out?

"I want to show you my flame."

"*What?*" they say at the same time, which Sapnap shouldn't find as endearing as he does. Quackity immediately pulls away from him to better stare at him and Sapnap regrets that he can't hold him as close. Karl does, too, which Sapnap *also* regrets. Being under their attention is an addicting thing and Sapnap knows he doesn't need to start saying wild shit to get it but the looks on their faces are almost funny enough that he's tempted.

"I want to show you my flame." He repeats, beating back the nervous laughter that tries to erupt. "I want you to touch it."

"It's *recovering* -"

"You can *do* that?"

"Yes," Sapnap looks between them, "For us - fire demons, I mean. For us, our flames are our hearts. They're our cores, our souls. They heat us, they power us, they regulate us. I want to show it to you."

"Isn't that...dangerous?" Quackity says nervously, "Sap, we saw it once and it was barely -" he trails off, choked up. Sapnap lets him work through it so he can continue, "I don't want you to get hurt."

"I won't." Sapnap promises. "It's okay. I want to show you."

"My intense need to see an inner flame up close and in person is really battling it out with my intense need for you not to die right now." Karl admits, frowning.

"I won't die." Sapnap laughs. "Both of you relax. I know what I'm doing. Just...sit there and be quiet for a second."

"Okay." Karl settles down. He reaches over to hold Quackity's hand and Quackity bites his lip so hard it turns white but doesn't argue when Sapnap starts the process.

It takes a moment of gentle urging to get his flame out. Part of it is due to lack of practice; unlike his dad, he hasn't had much reason to pull out his flame on his own. The other part is almost innate reluctance. His flame isn't as strong as it should be, and it doesn't want to be exposed. But *Sapnap* wants this, wants to show them, instincts be damned. He has to close his eyes when he sees his hands shimmer. It has always made him feel a bit dizzy, and it helps if he isn't looking, just leaning into what feels natural.

Sapnap exhales slowly, and opens his eyes.

His flame sits in the palms of his hands. It isn't as bad as he had feared; it's still smaller than it should be, as it had been at the end of Bad's last treatment. But it's bigger than it was just a few days ago; maybe it's only noticeable to him, but it *is* and that's a good sign. It's feeding itself again.

He can feel the warmth of it, both through him and in his hands. It's like the warm bread served with their meal, the fizz and tickle of wine in his veins, the feeling of Schlong in his hand when he's fighting. It's like a tent in a jungle; the soft heat of a shared campfire. Distantly, he tastes the bursting sweetness of toasted marshmallows. It's no longer white and ash-stained; it burns a merry orange, spreading into bright crimsons and soft yellow. In the coming months, the edges will fade into blue and then green as the intensity of the heat increases. For now, it tickles as it laps at his fingers, almost pushing itself forward; reaching for Karl and Quackity.

Sapnap finally finds the courage to look up from his flame to the two of them. Immediately, his face softens and he shifts the flame to sit in just one palm so he can brush away the tears already streaming down Karl's cheeks. Quackity isn't crying, but he is slack-jawed, unable to take his eyes from the small fire.

"It's alright, I promise." *Sapnap* says, "I know it's small right now, but I promise, I'm fine."

The flame crackles, impatient, and Quackity manages to drag his gaze up. It is with utter sincerity that he speaks, nothing less than adoration.

"It's *beautiful*," He says, and Karl lets out an audible sob, seemingly too overwhelmed to speak, "Sap, it's so beautiful."

Quackity's eyes flick between *Sapnap* and the flame, *his* flame. A moment later, he has lent over and is kissing *Sapnap* softly. His lips taste like wine and the honey drizzled on the lamb, and *Sapnap* has never felt exactly like this in his entire life, his flame in his hand, Karl nuzzling into the other, Quackity kissing him.

He wants it to last forever. Maybe it does; by the time Quackity breaks away, they're both breathless. Karl leans in a second later, his kiss shorter, tasting of salt. But he must sense a tinge of *Sapnap*'s impatience because he pulls away to wipe his tears after a brief moment.

"The people in this house," *Sapnap* starts, "Are the only people who have ever seen my flame. My parents, of course, and, when I got sick as a kid, George and Dream saw it while Bad was treating it. But I wanted you guys to be the first people *I* showed it to. For fire demons, it's... like your wings, Q. And it took... so much trust to let us touch your wings. Especially after everything that happened to them, to you, and you trusted us to take care of them. And if you hadn't guessed, I've been having a lot of trouble trusting lately." He smiles; he doesn't want them to think that he's struggling with that in this moment, or that it's their fault. It's just a fact.

"I don't think," He continues, haltingly, "I don't think I can ever trust like I used to. Naively. And if I waited for that to be true again, I don't know if I'd ever come home. So I'm going to choose,

instead. I've made the choice to trust you, to trust you both. And I can remind myself of that every day, if I ever feel like I did again. I'll remember that here, now, I love you and I trust you. *I trust you.*"

The flame strains against his fingertips. For all that it wants and he wants, his nervousness still beats a tattoo rhythm into his ribs, and he takes a deep breath.

"I trust you," He says, "And I want... I want you to hold my flame. Both of you."

Karl swallows back a noise that might be a sob, might be a laugh, it's difficult to tell.

"Sapnap..." Quackity says. He's been silent as Sapnap has talked, but when he speaks his voice is hoarse, "Are you sure?"

"One hundred percent," Sapnap says. "I want it to be you two. If you want. Touching my flame, it'll...it'll sort of forge a connection. You'll feel...me. My feelings. And the connection will be both ways, I'll feel *you*, too."

"We want," Karl speaks for the first time, voice shot enough that he stops to clear his throat, "We want you. All of you. I have nothing to hide about my feelings."

Quackity nods, certain and sure. "Me, either. We want everything you want to give us," he says, quietly.

"I've never done this before," Sapnap says. In his palm, his flame wiggles in delight, sparking and jumping in tandem to the excitement in Sapnap's chest. "We'll go slow. One at a time. Just be careful, keep your hands open. If you smother it, it could go out."

"Q first, then," Karl says, immediately, "My hands are shaking so bad, I don't want to drop it."

"It's not a baby," Sapnap says, but he presses a kiss to Karl's cheek and turns to Quackity, "Are you okay with that?"

"You know what these hands did," Quackity says, "All that time. All I did. You really...you would trust that?"

"Yes." Sapnap answers immediately, and with a gentle motion, presses his forehead to Quackity's, "I trust you. I love you. I want to show you just how much."

They breathe in tandem then, Karl's hand on each of their shoulders, a moment of serenity. A small burst of sparks, a huff of impatient smoke. Sapnap kisses the corner of Quackity's mouth, a careful promise.

"Hold out your hands, Q. It'll be a bit hot, so be careful, alright?"

"Will it burn?" Quackity asks, holding out his hands anyway at Sapnap's instruction.

"No," Sapnap says firmly, "Never. It would never hurt you."

I would never hurt you is left unsaid.

Gently, almost achingly slowly, Sapnap tips his flame into Quackity's open and waiting palms.

His vision tunnels a second later, narrowing down to nothing but the flame and the feeling of Quackity's fingers, clever, nimble, *safe*. Quackity is naturally cooler than Sapnap and it's a wonderful contrast, like a cold drink on a hot day, or swimming in a lake in summer. He's barely

aware of anything else, just Quackity and his hands, holding him close, holding him tight.

He can feel - *oh*. He can feel it all. The fear, the pain, the overwhelming guilt that follows Quackity like a cloud. The way that he loves, wholly, unquestionably, no matter how afraid he is. He can feel how much Quackity loves him; loves them both. It's a glaring sun piercing through the cloud; an ocean of endless, endless love. Stormy at times, tempestuous enough to batter ships against the rocks, with dark secrets hidden in the depths, but always beautiful, always worth taking the chance.

Quackity runs a soft finger over the bottom of his flame and a stray spark curls around it, holds it close to the very center of the flame. The tender action leaves Sapnap gasping, utterly breathless.

It's love; reverent, *adoring* love.

"Gods, Sapnap, Sapnap -" Karl's hand is on his shoulder as he shakes, Quackity looking at him with worried eyes, "Are you alright?"

"Am I hurting you?" Quackity asks, quiet, panicked, and Sapnap rapidly shakes his head.

"No, no -" He blinks the haze out of his eyes, away from being held and being loved and being seen, and forces them to look at Quackity. "It's... it's a lot, but Quackity, *angel* -"

He pleads with his eyes, hoping that Quackity can understand just what he's trying to say because he can't seem to find the words. It's completely, totally different from when his parents have touched his flame before; for one, only Bad has ever done it. Maybe it's because they're not fire demons, there is no protective flame of their own to keep them from simply fusing together. Or maybe it's because he loves them, and his flame *is* that love, and it yearns for them both as he does.

"It's perfect." He whispers, and Quackity's thumb drags over his flame, his *soul* one more time and he shudders with the intensity of it. Karl holds him, and Quackity holds his flame and everything is as it should be.

"Can you feel it, *angel*?" He manages to murmur, a sigh escaping from him as his flame dances over Quackity's fingers, delighted, "Can you feel how much I love you?"

"Yes," and now Quackity sounds close to tears, and his flame darts and bursts and blossoms as another tidal wave of emotion threatens to drown them both. It's overwhelming enough that Sapnap doesn't even realize he's closed his eyes, until he blinks back to existence to Quackity's forehead pressed to his own, Quackity whispering, "I love you, I love you, I love you," over and over again.

And this is only half. Karl is weeping just watching them, and meets his gaze with eyes just as desperate.

"Karl," Sapnap manages to get out, "Karl, *please*,"

With infinite care, with infinite gentleness, Quackity takes Sapnap's soul and softly releases it into Karl's trembling hands. Karl takes a hold of his flame and it's, it's -

If Quackity was the ocean, then Karl is the air and the skies above. He's freedom, soaring above it all and always having a safe place to call home. He's the wind, both changeable and dependable, fanning Sapnap's flames and making them stronger, brighter. The fire in Karl's hand *flares* with the strength of it, of the love bubbling over Karl like a fountain, unable to be contained. He loves *so much*, this mercenary turned librarian turned lover, and Sapnap can feel how exhilaratingly terrifying it is for Karl, to love as he does now; to love with surety, with permanency. The privilege

that is the very wind loving you enough to tie itself to you and never wanting to let go.

“Sapnap,” Karl says, pulling his attention back to the present, “Gods, *Sapnap*. Do you know how beautiful you are?”

Karl lifts the flame up, as close to his face as he can get; it’s as much an adoring examination as it is a curious one, and Sapnap loves it, loves *him* so much that he can’t help it. The flame reacts on instinct and nudges itself up and outwards; nuzzling against Karl’s cheek, nestling in the space between his breaths. Karl gasps in surprise. Utter contentment rushing through him, Sapnap can’t keep himself fully upright, his limbs turning to jelly in Quackity’s embrace.

“*Oh*,” is all he can say because Quackity has reached out and is slowly stroking the edges of the flames that reach for him in turn. All the while, the flame bobs and weaves, pressing sparkling kisses to Karl’s cheeks, eyes, nose, stealing stray hairs to fuel itself. Having both their hands on his flame is *so much* in the best way possible.

“Hello,” Karl coos, talking to the flame itself, and it’s so cute that Sapnap might cry. Quackity reaches out to wipe his cheek with his free hand and he realizes he probably already is. “Hello, my love.”

It pours out of them both, all the love in the entire world, a bottomless ocean, the infinite sky; that’s how much they love him.

And in return, Sapnap is the fire, the earth beneath their feet. He burns and he burns and he keeps them upright and warm and safe. He loves them as the flowers love the sun, as the sands love the tides, as the trees love the wind that spreads their blossom. He loves them with all that he is, and they are holding all that he is.

“I love you,” He says, eventually, when their tears have run dry and his mouth is sore from smiling. His flame kisses Quackity’s nose, and the other man turns pink, which only makes Karl pepper him with more kisses, “I love you both so much.”

“We know.” Karl sniffls. “We can feel it. And you can feel it for us, too, right?”

“Yes.” Sapnap focuses in on it. It’s overwhelming, nearly drowning him, but he wants it. He wants every part of it. “*Prime*, yes.”

“Thank you.” Quackity carefully brings their hands to Sapnap’s chest. “I don’t...even know what else to say. Thank you for sharing this with us. Thank you for choosing us. Trusting us.”

Sapnap closes his eyes as their hands withdraw, leaving him and his flame alone in the world again. He feels the echoes, though, of them. Brushes of Quackity’s fingers, the tip of Karl’s nose. When he carefully presses it back inside, it goes easily, content. Satiated, for now.

It warms him, tips of his hair to tips of his toes; it’s *heat*, real heat, and it feels good. It feels like healing.

“Thank you for letting me.” He says when he can open his eyes. Behind him, he hears the real fire crackling. The room is warm, still echoing with the laughter of the night. He feels drunk on them. “Can I stay with you tonight?”

“You don’t ever have to ask.” Karl says immediately. “You belong in our bed. Always.”

“You belong with us.” Quackity agrees and Sapnap melts, leans into them both. He’s accepted with open arms.

“I know,” he murmurs, and the very best part is that he does.

Getting out of bed in the morning is hard. Karl keeps dragging him back in with deals of kisses if he only stays just a few minutes more. Quackity is silent as death, maybe still recovering from their emotional *stuff* the night before. He delivers on every kiss Karl promises and smiles sleepily when Sapnap meets his eyes but he seems nervous, too. Sapnap wishes he could ease his mind. He wishes he could tell him that he isn’t leaving, but Sapnap still isn’t sure, himself. He doubts he will be for a few hours more. He hasn’t even told Dream or George that he was considering it; he imagines that he wouldn’t make it far before they came trotting after him, no matter how much space he said he needed.

There’s a packed bag in Dream’s room that Skeppy helped him put together a few days ago, before he’d even seen George or Dream again. If he decides to leave, he’ll only need that bag.

Eventually, Sapnap manages to drag them both out of bed with promises of breakfast. The smell has been wafting into their room for almost an hour after they woke up and Sapnap is *hungry*. When they reach the kitchen, it’s to Bad and Dream frying eggs and bacon. Dream has bedhead something fierce, his short hair both spiky and flat, depending on the angle, and he’s wearing pants and nothing else. Bad, at least, is dressed, so he is manning the frying pan while Dream carefully, sleepily slices fruit. There’s also a plate of pancakes, which Sapnap eyes upon spotting.

“Good morning, boys!” Bad booms, making all of them jump, “Nice of you to join us!”

“We aren’t the last ones,” Sapnap protests, “I don’t see George or Skeppy!”

“Skeppy is with the horses.” Bad smiles, “Prepping them for our return trip.”

“And George is right here,” George says, sweeping into the kitchen with a basket of apples in his arms, “Getting more fruit for *your* quasi-vegetarian paramour.”

“*Paramour*,” Karl says happily, “I like that one.”

“Don’t encourage him, Karl.” Sapnap says, rolling the sleeves of his shirt up so he can go help Dream clean and chop the apples.

They have breakfast when the food is finished and Skeppy has returned, a short meal just as rambunctious as dinner had been but ultimately cut short by the toll of the clock hitting noon. Skeppy and Bad had chosen to set out around this time because it would put them hitting their first rest stop close to nine, a perfect time to make camp before it started getting dark.

Despite the toll of the clock, Skeppy sends Sapnap and Quackity to do dishes and takes the other three to help him finish preparing the carriage he’d somehow acquired that morning, perhaps from someone who owed him in town, which had been delivered in the middle of breakfast and had caused a lot of complaining from Bad.

Quackity doesn’t ask if Sapnap has made a decision while they wash up together, and Sapnap is grateful for it. As the time of his parents’ departure approaches, his anxiety is growing, filling his stomach and working its way up his chest and throat. What if he only feels safe and recovered because they’re here? What if his flame starts to weaken again? What if something happens when they’re gone and he regresses? What if he hurts one of them? He feels closer than ever to Karl and Quackity, but he’s still also dealing with the simmering anger and distress that comes to mind any time his thoughts drift to the past. He wants so badly to stay, but he’s also half-convinced that the only way he’ll find peace is if he goes. He doesn’t know what to do, and no one can *tell him* what

to do.

He regrets not talking to Dream and George about this. He knows that they would have helped him put it into perspective, especially Dream. But he also knows that neither of them would have let him go on his own, and that would have left Karl and Quackity all alone in this big fucking mansion for however long Sapnap decided he needed to be away.

“Sap.” Quackity says quietly and Sapnap blinks back into himself, looks down and realizes that the water is roiling and Quackity has removed his hands as the steam shimmers through the air.

“Oh.” He quickly pulls his hands out, too, “Fuck, sorry, Big Q. Did I hurt you?”

“No.” Quackity scoffs, “I know when to jump out of a boiling pot, hotstuff.”

It makes Sapnap blush, laughing, “Okay, okay. Fair. Still, sorry. I wasn’t paying attention.”

“Too much thinking?”

“Too much thinking.” Sapnap admits. “I don’t...I don’t know what to do.”

“Hey,” Quackity chucks him under the chin with a gentle finger, smiling. Sapnap can tell that it’s just a little forced around the edges, a brave face, and it hurts him as much as he appreciates it. “You’re the only one that knows what’s best for you. I know I’m...I know you can tell I’m sad. Karl and I will be sad, if you leave. But we’ll be okay, and we’ll wait for you. If you go, we’ll be here when you get back.”

Sapnap bites his lip hard, swallows the words he wants to say and nods. “Thank you, Quackity.”

“Thank you, Sapnap.” Quackity says right back. “I know this is hard. You’re used to supporting us, supporting *everyone*. But we can support you, too. We’ll survive. Don’t turn us into stones that hold you back, Sap.”

“You will *never*,” Sapnap says fiercely, “Not ever, be someone that holds me back. Either of you. No matter what I decide to do.”

“Good.” Quackity smiles, playful, “Now finish scrubbing the dishes. The water is too hot for me and we don’t have time for it to cool down. I’ll dry.”

“That isn’t fair,” Sapnap plays along, already going to do as he’s told, “This is skirting your responsibilities, Quackity.”

“What are you gonna do, tattle on me?” Quackity sniffs. “I’m Bad’s favorite, you know.”

“Don’t tell Karl that.”

“He knows.” Quackity snaps a towel at him and Sapnap instinctively splashes water at him in self-defense, laughing when Quackity leaps back with a yelp.

“Sapnap, it’s hot!”

“Then don’t play around it!”

“Not fair!”

“What are you gonna do about it, tattle on me?” Sapnap simpers back and laughs loudly when Quackity only glares at him with a pout.

Despite the fun, they finish the dishes rather quickly. When they head outside, it's to see the carriage set up and hitched to the horses Bad and Skeppy brought with them on their mad dash to the estate. Bad and Dream are hugging tightly and whatever Bad is saying to him has Dream red-eyed and nodding against his shoulder. Skeppy has George by the shoulders, and his face is serious as he says something. George, just as somber, nods back, holding Skeppy's wrists tightly. Karl is off to the side, giving them all space. He waves when he sees the two of them approaching and Sapnap stops at his side, looking at his parents and brothers.

"Okay?" He asks softly.

"Saying goodbye," Karl explains as Bad and Skeppy then seem to switch their children out with each other, Skeppy dragging Dream down into a tight, tight hug and Bad enveloping George in an embrace that has him squirming and loudly complaining even as he hugs back.

"I always hated this part." Sapnap admits. "When they'd bring us back to the barracks after taking us on trips. Dream would always cry after and get mad at me if I didn't cry, too."

"Thanks for the heads up. I can cry on command, so I'll avoid his wrath tonight." Karl tosses an arm around both of their shoulders. "Ready to join them?"

Sapnap doesn't know if he means the group as a whole, or the leaving party.

Instead of answering, he just starts walking and both of them follow him.

"There you are," Skeppy lets Dream go, smoothing down Dream's shirt - a proper one, now that he's dressed appropriately. "I sent you to wash dishes, not clean the whole kitchen. You took forever."

"Quackity started shit." Sapnap says immediately and Quackity yells in protest.

"He *boiled the water*, Skeppy! I couldn't even help!"

"Classic boil the water trick," Skeppy sighs, "He learned that from his dad."

"Hey!"

"Baaaaad," George groans, "Go hug your son or something, let me go!"

"I'm just so proud of you!" Bad sobs, voice wavering, "My little prince! All grown up and away from the castle! Thriving!"

"Yes, thank you," George pats his back, "I appreciate that praise. I'll cherish it, even, just let me go now."

"Let him go, you big baby," Skeppy smacks Bad's back and, with a sniffle, Bad lets George go, who steps away with an embarrassed blush.

"You guys have plenty of rations." Dream says seriously, "I packed some extra, just in case -"

"Dream, you didn't need to do that."

"Just in *case*, though. You never know. And I put a tent in your enderchest, and one of our camper beds, and -"

"Dream," Skeppy laughs fondly, "We don't need you to do that."

"Well, I did." Dream says stubbornly, "You two are all we've got left, so you're surviving it out there, okay? Stay safe and take care of yourselves. Come visit again."

"We will. Maybe soon, even." Skeppy glances Sapnap's way and Sapnap - still doesn't really know. Quackity grabs his hand, squeezes it tight. Karl's arm curls over his shoulders, more hugging than holding. Like they're already saying goodbye.

Dream looks between them, and then at Bad and Skeppy and his eyes narrow.

"Is there something you're not telling us?" He frowns. "It feels secretive right now."

"No secrets." Sapnap admits. "Just...some indecision."

He steps forward, toward his parents, and Karl and Quackity reluctantly let him go.

When Sapnap thinks of hugging Skeppy, he thinks of being all of two feet tall and of his father covered in piercingly blue diamond. Skeppy seems so big in Sapnap's memories, even standing next to his father.

Now, they're practically the same height. Even as skinny as he is, Skeppy is smaller when Sapnap hugs him. There is no diamond armor; even with his lack of control, Sapnap's flame isn't strong enough to raise his temperature high enough to burn anyone, let alone Skeppy.

Despite all the *different*, though, being hugged by his father still feels the same. Protected, loved, practically spoiled from it; Skeppy doesn't hide how much he cares and neither does Bad when he hugs them both close and holds them.

And just like that, held between them, supported and safe and knowing that they love him, he knows what he needs to do.

When they release him, he's grinning. His heart finally feels at peace.

"Still indecisive?" Skeppy asks, pinching one of his cheeks until he's swatted away.

"No." Sapnap says, "I know what I need to do."

"And what would that be?" Bad asks, sniffling.

"I..." Sapnap looks over his shoulder at Karl and Quackity, at Dream and George, who are staring at him with wide, worried eyes. Behind them, the mansion sits against the blue sky of the Badlands. There's the orchard just peeking around the back that he hasn't visited in a while, and Quackity's garden hidden from sight. The ample forest to hunt in, the village with the baker and the cobbler's illicit affair. It will be here, waiting for him. He has time to explore all of the lands, meet the people, deepen his bonds with his brothers and his lovers. Leaving won't end any of his opportunities; it will only put them on hold.

"I'm so fucking happy to see you guys again," he says and he means it to his core. "I missed you."

"We missed you, too. Seeing what you've built for yourself..." Bad looks over Sapnap's shoulder at what Sapnap just saw. "We're proud of you, cub."

"And we understand." Skeppy squeezes his arms.

"I love you." Sapnap leans down to knock his forehead to Skeppy's. Armor unfolds just in time to protect Skeppy's skull and the knock is as hard as one should be between a child and his parents.

“Thank you so much. For everything.”

“Always,” Bad squeezes the back of his neck and brings their foreheads together somehow harder than usual. Sapnap closes his eyes, basking in them for just a moment longer. And then he steps away, back toward the others.

“Make sure to message us when you get back to Kinoko.” He says firmly. “If you don’t, we’re going to have to come check on you, old man.”

“Old?” Skeppy startles, “Old?”

“Okay, that’s our cue to leave,” Bad laughs, looping an arm around Skeppy just as he lunges for Sapnap. Sapnap dances back, just out of reach, laughing.

“Get home safe.” He grins as Bad physically picks Skeppy up.

“If your dad weren’t here to save your life, Sapnap,” Skeppy warns loudly, but he’s laughing under the scowl and Sapnap’s eyes are watering. He tries to blink the tears back. So maybe it was actually *him* that cried after every goodbye and Dream who had to fake some tears to appease him. So what?

Skeppy settles down when Bad puts him on the carriage and climbs onto the bench next to him. As the carriage startles into motion, Sapnap waves.

“Bye!” Dream calls after them, “Thank you guys for everything!!”

“Don’t fucking die!” George yells, too.

“It was good to see you again!” Karl adds on, as loud as he can.

“We’ll have more dinners, next time!” Quackity says lastly, and Skeppy stands on wobbly legs to wave at them while Bad tries to desperately hold him steady so he doesn’t fall off until the carriage gets too far away to be more than a speck.

Sapnap lets his arms fall, staring after them. He’s sad to see them go, but there is no regret in him. To leave would have put so much on hold, and he doesn’t want to wait for any of it. He wants to stay here, with this little family they’ve made, and grow from this. He wants to stay with them.

“Sap?” George says, stepping up to his side, “You okay?”

“I’m okay.” Sapnap says, wiping at his eyes roughly. “I’m fine.”

“Good.” Dream comes to his other side, drops an arm over his shoulder. “Care to tell us what the fuck that last thing was about, then?”

“Um.” Sapnap stops, “Uh...nothing?”

“Liar.” George says sweetly. “Tell us.”

“Oh, would you *look* at that.” Sapnap ducks out from under Dream’s arm, scampers behind Karl and Quackity, who look both bemused and shocked all at once. “I forgot that we didn’t put the dishes away. Quackity, Karl, can you come help?”

“No.” Karl says, smiling. “I think Dream and George would love to help.”

“We would.” George smiles, sickeningly nice. “Come on, Sap. Let’s go do some laundry, while

we're at it."

"Guys?" Sapnap looks at Quackity pleading, "Baby, you want to come help, right?"

Quackity smiles and Sapnap knows he's been abandoned. "Have fun, hotstuff. We'll see you after."

"This is some bullshit." Sapnap groans as Dream hooks their arms together and George does the same, trapping him between them. "This is *some* bullshit. I just said goodbye to my parents, give me time to mourn, at least!"

"We'll mourn plenty, once you tell us what secrets you've been keeping, you weasel." Dream says darkly and Sapnap groans louder as he's carted off to do *laundry* while they grill him. Karl and Quackity just *watch*, giggling to each other as he's *kidnapped*.

Maybe he should have gone with his parents after all.

"So..." Karl says that night, fingers curling into the smattering dark hair on Sapnap's chest, tracing those familiar patterns on his skin. "You stayed."

"Mmm, I did," Sapnap stretches, content in his spot beneath them both. It's slightly different from usual in that Quackity has decided to splay tonight; any skin that Karl hasn't claimed as his own, Quackity has dominion over. Bare skin glides against his as Quackity shifts his leg to better toss it over Sapnap's hips and Karl presses long and lean against his side. The thin sheet settles around their hips, Sapnap's warmth enough for them all to be comfortable.

"What made you decide?" Quackity taps his fingers one at a time in a slow rhythm over Sapnap's heart, voice quiet in the dark. "I thought you wanted..."

"I was going to say yes, I thought," Sapnap shifts under them, a hand at the base of Quackity's spine and another buried in Karl's curls, stroking through the silky strands. "But I looked over at you guys and I realized that you *would* wait for me. And that's nice. That's...that means a lot."

"So...?"

"I knew you would. But, not to sound like Karl, I'm ready for my next chapter with you guys. I don't need an interlude."

"A happy ever after?" Karl teases, "Sap, you romantic."

"I don't care about ever after," Sapnap says, "Just...living happily is good enough for me."

"No such thing as a happy ending, remember?" Quackity looks at Karl across Sapnap's chest and Karl smiles fondly, leaning over to kiss him just once.

"Just the next chapter." Karl agrees. "I'm...really excited to see how it goes, guys."

"Me, too." Sapnap admits. "We get to write it together. Nothing more exciting than that." Quackity nods against his shoulder, lips pressing soft kisses to the skin he can reach that have Sapnap close to giggling.

Eventually, they settle down. The night is warm and dark; somewhere else in the house, Dream and George are together. Sapnap knows that in the morning, they'll *still* be there. Things are...they're okay. Not perfect, but Sapnap doesn't need perfect. Just this, Karl and Quackity at his sides, Dream

and George safe and happy and close by. This is enough.

Sapnap curls up, Karl on his right side and Quackity holding on tightly to his left, and finally, he sleeps well.

Chapter End Notes

HELLO HELLO LOOK!!! AT THIS AMAZING INCREDIBLE CREATION!!!! We are so so so so excited every time we see someone create something for this fic and beyond grateful for all the love and support this fic has gotten. I linked all of the art/content below in alphabetical order by creator (and PLEASE let us know if i forgot something or if u want something added to the list!!) so please check them all out. Each of them have been so so nice to us and we appreciate all of u <3 <3

East!! is so lovely. Thank u for your enthusiasm and support!!

this is one of my fav scenes!!!!

a comic of dnf :(my HEART is BROKEN

GEORGE!!!!

a SCARECROW PLAYLIST!!!!!! AHH!!!!!!

Ghost!!! thank you for all of your incredible art and also reccing this fic so often, i'm pretty sure your art and recs drove a solid chunk of the readership this way and we appreciate u so much!!!!!!

(Ghost made a PLACE for all of her incredible scarecrow art that you can check out here!!)! Here are links to a few bc i made this list before she made that folder LOL!

karlnapity CHARACTER DESIGNS god these look amazing it just took control and is now just How I Picture Them lol

seriously one of my favorite moments in the whole fic and ghost captured it SO well. amazing.

BABY DREAMNAP i will simply CRY look how cute they are!!

MORE BABY DREAMNAP!!! DOING LAUNDRY!!!! CALLING PUNZ A BITCH!!!!

this scene :(breaks my whole heart. And ghost just stabs me right thru my soul

karl :(and q :(!!!!!! Sleepy leaning times!!!!!! LOOK AT THEM!!!!!!

SAPNAP AT SWORD POINT!!!!

Hana! Your comments were so fun to read and your art is incredible, thank you for sharing it with us :)

this is a MOVIE POSTER and it includes such cool IMAGERY

Jess!!! YOU!!! ARE!!!! SO GOOD AND SO HELPFUL AND I LOVE U SO MUCH!!!!!!

i kno jess worked so hard on this piece and i was practically vibrating waiting bc i knew it was happening and AH!!! God. no words!!

Kasper!! I really loved getting to talk to you about karl in this fic and your thoughts were so interesting to hear!!!

A PLAYLIST!!!!!! I LOVE!!!!!!

Rudy!! your art is so cool and I loved getting to see the ref you used for your art!!!
honq ART theyre adorable :(
SAPNAP!!!! HE IS SO TIRED PLEASE HELP HIM!!!!!
this is a sketch of the above and also a ref of the armor and ALSO A VERY CUTE
LIL COMIC THAT MAKES ME LAUGH EVERY TIME I LOOK AT IT!

End Notes

We will be posting a chapter every Wednesday and Sunday, so subscribe if you want to be notified when we upload and leave us a comment if you liked it :D thank you for reading!

Check out our socials here! [hannah](#), [bramble patch!](#))

Works inspired by this [one](#) [Pearls Born to Run](#) by [Hermitori](#)

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!